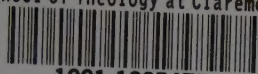


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THE LOST  
“BOOK OF THE NATIVITY OF JOHN”





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THE LOST  
"BOOK OF THE  
NATIVITY OF JOHN"

*A Study in Messianic Folklore and Christian Origins  
With a New Solution to the Virgin-Birth Problem*

BY  
HUGH J. SCHONFIELD

AUTHOR OF  
"AN OLD HEBREW TEXT OF ST. MATTHEW'S GOSPEL"

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TO

MISS MARGARET WATSON

WHOSE CONSTANT FRIENDSHIP AND UNFAILING  
SYMPATHY HAVE CONTRIBUTED SO MUCH  
TOWARDS ITS PRODUCTION, THIS BOOK IS  
AFFECTIONATELY DEDICATED BY

THE AUTHOR



“AND, behold, one of the disciples of John asserted that John was the Christ, and not Jesus, inasmuch as Jesus himself declared that John was greater than all men and all prophets. ‘If, then,’ said he, ‘he be greater than all, he must be held to be greater than Moses, and than Jesus himself. But if he be the greatest of all, then must he be the Christ.’”

*Clementine Recognitions*, chap. lv.





## PREFACE

THE joys of discovery are reserved for those who leave the beaten track and wander in less frequented places. Just beyond the hedge which borders the highway, the lover of Nature finds unsuspected beauties. Beneath the surface of the familiar soil the mineralogist and archæologist lay bare the hidden treasures. Under his microscope the scientist sees wonders withheld from the common gaze. So it is to-day in the field of Biblical research. There is no need to deplore the lack of material which the student can utilise, or to wait until the spade has unearthed some ancient papyrus, or a monastic library yields up a long-forgotten text. Ready to the hand of every seeker are writings of Christian fathers and Jewish sages dating from the earliest times of the Christian faith, whose names are household words, and of others who lived in more remote centuries. The pages of such writers contain many an unsolved problem, many a curious tradition which might illuminate a dark corner of history if turned to proper account by a watchful investigator. Not only so, but the scholar's library may contain more books than he himself is aware of. Documents which once played an important part in moulding the fortunes of the Church, but whose very titles in some cases are now lost, may be scattered in fragments up and down his shelves. That this is not an exaggerated statement may be illustrated by Dr. J. Rendel Harris's discovery of the lost *Book of Testimonies*, and Dr. Zahn's reconstruction of part of Tatian's *Diatessaron*.

The present volume is the result of an investigation, extending over several years, of the problem of the Gospel Nativity narratives. The incidental recovery of the lost *Book of the Nativity of John* which I made in the course of this investigation was quite an accident. I had no suspicion of the existence of such a work.

That it did exist, I was soon able to gather sufficient evidence to prove, as surely as if an actual manuscript had come to light. Its loss at a very early date is not to be wondered at, as the Church had the best possible reasons for suppressing it, while the religious changes which affected the body of people, whose heritage the book was, made its original implications to be soon forgotten, and even its form altered. The book is a record of the birth of John the Baptist in which he figures as the infant Messiah, and many of the incidents run parallel to the Gospel stories of the birth of Jesus, which in my own opinion they antedate, though this will probably be contested by some scholars. At any rate, we have here a document which at last helps us towards a satisfactory solution of the Gospel Nativity problem, a result which must be of immense benefit to the Church ; setting at rest, as it does, the expressed and unexpressed doubts of many earnest Christians, who cannot but feel that the accounts of the birth of Jesus in the First and Third Gospels read more like folklore than history in spite of able defenders of the orthodox view. As the Rev. S. Baring-Gould wrote many years ago, "The new lights that break in on us are not always the lanterns of burglars."

Perhaps I ought to say a word or two here about the scope of the present essay. The fact that John the Baptist was regarded as the Messiah by a numerous following may be a new one to many people. I have thought it advisable, therefore, to provide an introductory chapter setting forth those features of the Baptist's mission which made it possible for such a claim to be made on his behalf, and tracing very briefly the fortunes of the sect which accepted him as their leader. In Part I. the reader will find the evidence which I have collected in proof of the existence of the *Book of the Nativity of John* : the order of the sections follows, more or less, the same stages of discovery as those upon which I myself advanced. Part II. is simply a tentative reconstruction of the lost book, and is designed to show the coherence of the traditions when arranged as a continuous narrative. Part III. goes behind the Nativity stories, both of John and Jesus, in an attempt to account for their composition, and to trace their sources. In this Part, among other suggestions, I have given my reasons

for believing that the Epistle to the Hebrews is in reality an Epistle to the Samaritans.

It is not possible to acknowledge my indebtedness to all the authors whose works I have used, but the names of most of them will be found in either the text or footnotes.

I cannot pretend to have made an exhaustive survey of the evidence in favour of my novel theory. I have been pioneering in a strange and almost unknown country, and have brought back a goodly sized nugget as token of the riches to be found there.

HUGH J. SCHONFIELD.

LONDON,

*September 1929.*





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# THE LOST "BOOK OF THE NATIVITY OF JOHN"

## INTRODUCTION

### THE BAPTIST MESSIAH AND HIS FOLLOWERS

HITHERTO few scholars have treated John the Baptist as an independent personality, apart from the subordinate position accorded him in the Gospels of forerunner to Jesus.<sup>1</sup> The policy of the Gospel writers, crystallized in the saying put into the mouth of the Baptist in the Fourth Gospel, "He must increase, but I must decrease," was consistently directed to utilizing this historic figure as the supreme witness to the Messiahship of Jesus, and then, his purpose served, to relegate him to the limbo of forgetfulness. Here and there, however, even in the Gospels, we catch a glimpse of a higher rôle which many of his generation assigned to the Baptist: "The people were in suspense," we read, "and all men debated in their hearts of John, whether he were the Messiah, or not."<sup>2</sup> The continual recurrence of John's denial, whether actually made by him or put into his mouth, only shows how prevalent was this opinion. It seems fairly certain, apart from the biased evidence of the Gospels, that John did indeed make no claim to be the Messiah; but this did not prevent his followers from making such a claim on his behalf, his character and acts being sufficiently Messianic to warrant their doing so.

It has been said that John was an ascetic, an Essene, but this requires qualification. He invited the Jews to baptism, but there is no indication that this was a daily rite of purification such as the Essenes practised. It was "not the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God." Josephus, who says exactly the opposite,<sup>3</sup> may well have

<sup>1</sup> A notable exception is the Rev. Alban Blakiston in his book, *John Baptist and his Relation to Jesus*.

<sup>2</sup> Luke iii. 15.

<sup>3</sup> *Antiq.* xviii. v. 2.

been mistaken, imagining that John's baptism was of the same order as that of his master, Banus the Essene, who "lived in the desert, and used no other clothing than grew upon trees, and had no other food than what grew of its own accord, and bathed himself in cold water frequently, both night and day, in order to preserve his chastity."<sup>1</sup> John's baptism was a baptism of rebirth, a baptism once for all such as the proselyte to Judaism underwent, admitting him to the fellowship of the children of God, the heirship of the kingdom of God. It was a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins—a baptism not only of water, making the candidate a natural son of Abraham, but of the spirit, making him a spiritual son. For "except a man be born of water and of the spirit, he cannot (be he Jew or Gentile) enter into the kingdom of God." ■ It was thus a rite of markedly Messianic significance. "Why baptizest thou then," he was asked, "if thou be not that Messiah, nor Elijah, neither that Prophet?"<sup>3</sup>

In the next place, "John came neither eating nor drinking": his disciples fasted oft, and so did the Pharisees.<sup>4</sup> But this was not the fasting of an ascetic, mortifying the flesh that the soul might soar into the mystic heights. It was rather the fasting of a good man for the sins of the people, that God might look upon them again with favour, reminiscent of the injunction of the prophet Joel: "Sanctify ye a fast, . . . and cry unto the Lord, Alas for the day! for the day of the Lord is at hand, and as a destruction from the Almighty shall it come."<sup>5</sup> In the Talmud we hear of R. Zadok who fasted for forty years before the destruction of the Temple, in order that the threatened calamity might be averted, and of R. Eleazar of Modin who, during the siege of Bethar by the troops of Hadrian, fasted and prayed daily, "O Lord of the Universe! sit not in judgment this day." The fasting of the Baptist was vicarious rather than ascetic.

Then the raiment of John has to be considered. He wore a garment "of camel's hair, and a leathern girdle about his loins." Such raiment as this had the prophet Elijah worn. It was not chosen, therefore, in order to express the wearer's renunciation of earthly vanities, but for its prophetic implications.<sup>6</sup> The Essenes dressed in white. John was decidedly not an Essene: his vocation was Messianic, not Monastic. This was quite clearly

<sup>1</sup> *Life*, 2.<sup>2</sup> John iii. 5.<sup>3</sup> John i. 25.<sup>4</sup> Matt. ix. 14, xi. 18.<sup>5</sup> Joel i. 14, 15.<sup>6</sup> 2 Kings i. 8.

understood by his contemporaries. There is no reason to suspect the authenticity of the passage referring to John in Josephus' *Antiquities*,<sup>1</sup> wherein the tremendous influence of the Baptist's personality is so briefly but so definitely described. "Now, when others came to crowd about him," writes Josephus, "for they were greatly moved by hearing his words, Herod, who feared lest the great influence John had over the people might put it into his power and inclination to raise a rebellion (for they seemed ready to do anything he should advise), thought it best, by putting him to death, to prevent any mischief he might cause, and not bring himself into difficulties by sparing a man who might make him repent of it when it should be too late." What words were they, we may ask, which so moved the Jewish crowds? The Gospels provide the answer; they were the words which voiced themselves in the clarion call, "The kingdom of God is at hand." In this slogan we have the key to the Baptist's mission, and it is essential that its content should be understood.

The kingdom of God, as conceived by the loyal Jew of the first century A.D., finds expression in such a prayer as the following, which, though compiled in the third century A.D., is pre-Christian in substance:

"It is our duty to praise the Lord of all things, to ascribe greatness to Him who formed the world in the beginning, since He hath not made us like the nations of other lands, and hath not placed us like other families of the earth, since He hath not assigned unto us a portion as unto them, nor a lot as unto all their multitude. For we bend the knee and offer worship and thanks before the supreme King of kings, the Holy One, blessed be He, who stretched forth the heavens and laid the foundations of the earth, the seat of whose glory is in the heavens above, and the abode of whose might is in the loftiest heights. He is our God; there is none else: in truth He is our King; there is none besides Him; as it is written in His Law, And thou shalt know this day, and lay it to thine heart, that the Lord, He is God in heaven above and upon the earth beneath: there is none else.

"We therefore hope in Thee, O Lord our God, that we may speedily behold the glory of Thy might, when Thou wilt remove the abominations from the earth, and the idols will be utterly cut off, when the world will be perfected under the kingdom of the

<sup>1</sup> *Antiq.* XVIII. v. 2.



Almighty, and all the children of flesh will call upon Thy Name, when Thou wilt turn unto Thyself all the wicked of the earth. Let all the inhabitants of the world perceive and know that unto Thee every knee must bow, every tongue must swear. Before Thee, O Lord our God, let them bow and fall; and unto Thy glorious Name let them give honour; let them all accept the yoke of Thy kingdom, and do Thou reign over them speedily, and for ever and ever. For the kingdom is Thine, and to all eternity Thou wilt reign in glory; as it is written in Thy Law, The Lord shall reign for ever and ever. And as it is said, And the Lord shall be king over all the earth: in that day shall the Lord be one, and His Name one."<sup>1</sup>

The kingdom of God is, therefore, to be defined as the universal recognition of God as supreme Ruler, the sole Recipient of the worship of mankind—in a word, the Theocracy. If the kingdom of God was at hand, as John declared, then the triumph of Israel was at hand, the abolition of idolatry was at hand, the advent of the Messiah was at hand, the doom of the divine Cæsar and his Roman legions was at hand. No wonder "the people were in suspense, and all men debated in their hearts of John, whether he were the Messiah, or not." For it was the work of the Messiah to inaugurate the Theocracy. The same feverish expectation possessed those who believed that Jesus rather than John was the Messiah, for He too, when John was executed, continued to proclaim, "The kingdom of God is at hand." As Jesus went up to Jerusalem for the last time, the people "thought that the kingdom of God should immediately appear."<sup>2</sup>

The recently recovered witness of the Old Russian version of Josephus' *Wars* confirms the theocratic objective of the Baptist's ministry. "He came to the Jews and summoned them to freedom, saying: God hath sent me, that I may show you the way of the Law, wherein ye may free yourselves from many holders of power. And there will be no mortal ruling over you, only the Most High who hath sent me."<sup>3</sup>

The disciples of John awaited the kingdom of God, and this expectation linked them to the other Messianic sects, the chief of whom were the Galileans (the disciples of Judas of Galilee); the Nazarenes (the disciples of Jesus of Nazareth); and the Strict-

<sup>1</sup> *Alenu* (Authorized Jewish Prayer Book, pp. 76-7).

<sup>2</sup> Luke xix. 11.

<sup>3</sup> Following *Wars*, II. vii. 2.

Pharisees, or Zealots. The description given by Josephus of the Galileans applies equally well to all these parties. "These men," he says, "agree in all other things with the Pharisaic notions; but they have an inviolable attachment to liberty; and they say that God is to be their only Ruler and Lord."<sup>1</sup> The prayers of these sects were prayers for the coming of the kingdom of God. The Nazarenes requested their Master to teach them to pray "as John also taught his disciples. And he said unto them, When ye pray, say, Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be Thy Name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, as in heaven, so on earth."<sup>2</sup> The disciples were not asking Jesus for a formula of prayer to take the place of other prayers, but for a prayer characteristic of the outlook of their party which they could recite on all occasions at the close of the public or private prayers, and which would thus serve to distinguish them at every gathering for worship. The Lord's Prayer was their badge. The Baptists and Strict-Pharisees also had their prayer of identification. The formula of the latter has been preserved to us, and runs as follows: "Magnified and hallowed be His great Name in the world which He hath created according to His will. May He establish His kingdom in (y)our lifetime, and in (y)our days, and in the lifetime of the whole house of Israel, speedily, and at a near time." ■

At a later date, the Lord's Prayer was incorporated into the liturgy of the Nazarene Synagogue, and the *Kaddish* into the liturgy of the Pharisaic Synagogue. In each case the prayer was then recited by the reader, and responses for the congregation were added. The response to the former prayer being: "Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen"; while the response to the latter was: "May His great Name be blessed for ever. Amen."

Christian theologians are slowly beginning to realize the importance of the Jewish conception of the kingdom of God in the first century B.C. and A.D. The Messianism which grew up to become the Christian religion was rocked in a political cradle. The thought of the kingdom coloured everything. "The Lord shall reign over them in mount Zion" (Mic. iv. 7) became in the *Targum* (the popular paraphrase) "The kingdom of Heaven shall be revealed

<sup>1</sup> *Antiq.* xviii. i. 6.

<sup>2</sup> Luke xi. 1, 2.

<sup>3</sup> *Kaddish* (Authorized Jewish Prayer Book, p. 37).

to them on mount Zion." "Behold your God" (Isa. xl. 9) was rendered "The kingdom of your God is revealed." Men contrasted "the yoke of flesh and blood" with "the yoke of the kingdom of Heaven." The declaration of the *Shema*, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one," received an altogether new importance. It became a test of Jewish loyalty. To recite the *Shema* was to take upon oneself the yoke of the kingdom of Heaven. Palestine was seething with unrest, yet few dared openly defy the tyranny of Rome or criticize the building of theatres, circuses, and temples by the Hellenized Herodian rulers. A sullen silence was generally maintained. Men nursed their vengeful thoughts in secret. Yet sometimes the enemy went too far, and then outbreaks occurred, as when Herod set up a golden eagle at the entrance of the Temple, or Quirinius carried out a Census, or Pilate brought the Roman ensigns into Jerusalem. For fear of spies and informers, who lurked everywhere, the popular leaders spoke in parables or cryptic oracles, winding up their discourses on the kingdom of Heaven with such a hint as, "Who hath ears to hear, let him hear." Messages of comfort circulated under the form known to us as Apocalypse, the chief Jewish literary product of that age. Messianic expectation ran rife without any very clear definition as to who the Messiah was or what he would do. He was variously considered to be King David, one of the Prophets risen again, a descendant of David, a second Moses, or a supernatural being specially created by God. He might be born normally, or suddenly descend from the skies. This or that popular leader might be he; one never knew. The people flocked after the most barefaced impostors, and after teachers who laid no claim to Messianic honours. A man was only proved to be a false Messiah when he made no attempt at revolt, or did so and was defeated. Signs and portents were seen in everything. The most ordinary celestial phenomena received a Messianic interpretation. The most innocent utterance of a popular preacher was given a Messianic construction. Nothing was deemed too impossible for the Messiah to accomplish. A cure became a miracle, thunders became voices from heaven. Disciples were ready to tell you that this He spake of the temple of His body; this of the Holy Spirit; this of His resurrection; this event fulfilled that prophecy, and that another. Legends clustered thick about the men whom the people delighted to honour, and of these

none were more popular than Jesus the son of Joseph, and John the son of Zachariah. Both were accepted as Messiah by a large following, and as a consequence fitting stories of how they came into the world were soon in circulation. Those concerning Jesus are well known to us from the canonical Gospels, but it is not generally known that similar stories were originally told of the birth of John the Baptist.

The history of the Baptists after the death of John is a very strange one, and still remains in many places obscure. Some further particulars, however, have in recent years become available by the publication of part of the literature of the Mandæans of the lower Euphrates, the present-day survivors of the sect.

As long as the Second Temple stood, and indeed for some decades after, political hopes still very largely coloured the outlook of the Messianic sects (Galileans, Nazarenes, Zealots, and Baptists). With the final destruction of the Jewish State, however, a certain impatience began to manifest itself which the writer of the Second Epistle of Peter sets himself to combat. "Where is the promise of his coming?" asked the Messianists, "for since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of the creation." Some there were who, losing all hope, gave themselves up to drunkenness and loose living, determined to make the most of the present as the future was so uncertain. Other more sober souls sought comfort in occultism and various mystic speculations. A significant parable was added to the discourse on the last things (Matt. xxiv.) :

"Who then is a faithful and wise servant, whom his lord hath made ruler over his household, to give them meat in due season? Blessed is that servant, whom his lord when he cometh shall find so doing. Verily I say unto you, That he shall make him ruler over all his goods. But and if that evil servant shall say in his heart, My lord delayeth his coming; and shall begin to smite his fellow-servants, and to eat and drink with the drunken; the lord of that servant shall come in a day when he looketh not for him, and in an hour that he is not aware of, and shall surprise him suddenly, and appoint him his portion with the hypocrites: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

Prior to the fatal war with Rome much bitterness and hostility existed between the rival Messianic groups, particularly between



the Nazarenes and the Baptists, each of whom sought to establish the claim of their master John or Jesus to the Messiahship. An energetic propaganda was carried on by both parties, and converts were sometimes won. A notable convert to the Nazarene cause was Apollos, a Baptist of Alexandria (Acts xviii. 24-28). Latterly, however, a common disappointment drew these and other Jewish sects (including the Samaritans) together, and though still retaining certain distinctive tenets they tended to sink many of their differences in the sea of Gnosticism.

Several early Christian writers have left us lists of these Jewish sects. Justin Martyr (c. A.D. 150) gives them as Sadducees, Genistæ, Meristæ, Galileans, Hellenists, Pharisees, and Baptists.<sup>1</sup> Hegesippus (c. A.D. 160) names the Essenes, Galileans, Hemero-baptists, Masbotheans, Samaritans, Sadducees, and Pharisees.<sup>2</sup> "For the people was now divided into many parties," says the writer of the *Clementine Recognitions*, "ever since the days of John the Baptist." He then goes on to speak of the Sadducees, Samaritans, and Pharisees, and remarks: "Yea, some even of the disciples of John, who seemed to be great ones, have separated themselves from the people, and proclaimed their own master as the Christ."<sup>3</sup>

Besides those already mentioned, we hear of other strange sects, either offshoots or distinct from them: Dositheans, Samp-sæans, Elchasaites, Simonians, etc. By the third century the political outlook had become almost wholly swamped by the mystical. Jesus, it was said, was the sun, and therefore had twelve disciples according to the twelve months; while John was the moon, and had thirty disciples, of whom one was a woman, according to the twenty-nine and a half days of the month, for the woman is half a man. Of these disciples of John the two principal, says tradition, were Dositheus and Simon Magus.<sup>4</sup> G. R. S. Mead quotes Mahammed ben Is'haq en-Nedim, who in his *Fihrist* (written in A.D. 987-988) says that the Mogtasilah, or Baptists, were then (in the tenth century) very numerous in the marsh districts between the Arabian desert and the Tigris and Euphrates. "Their head," he says, "was called el'Hasai'h (Elchasai) and he was the original founder of their confession. This el'Hasai'h had a disciple called Schimun (Simon)."<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Dial. c. Tryph.* lxxx.

<sup>2</sup> Euseb., *Eccl. Hist.* iv. xxii.

<sup>3</sup> *Recog.* i. liv.

<sup>4</sup> *Clem. Hom.* xxiii.

<sup>5</sup> *Did Jesus Live 100 B.C.?*, pp. 385-6.



The Mandæans (Gnostics) of the lower Euphrates represent all that is left to-day of the sect of Baptists. The Arabs call them Sūbbās, which means Baptists, while they have been erroneously termed by missionaries Christians of St. John. Their *Sidrā d' Yahyā* (Book of John) contains nearly all that the Mandæans have preserved traditionally of the life of their founder, but in such a gnostic form that it is often hard to distinguish history from mystery.

This short introduction on the Baptist and his disciples will have served its purpose if it has drawn attention to the Messianic character of the life and teaching of John in the period of Jewish history which more than any other was full of Messianic expectation, and also to the undoubted fact that John was regarded as Messiah by a numerous following. The gnostic affinities of the Baptist sect in later times, and the various vicissitudes through which it passed, make it improbable that anything like a straightforward narrative of John's life (such as the Gospels provide of the life of Jesus) was ever composed, but there are evidences to show that there did once exist a book describing the marvellous birth of John in his character of Messiah, compiled by his disciples, which in parts paralleled the account of the birth of Jesus in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. This book, which would antedate the Gospel Nativity narratives and may have helped to produce them, is still largely recoverable from different sources. In the following pages an attempt has been made to resurrect the lost *Book of the Nativity of John*, and to show how the legends contained in it, and in the Gospel narratives of the birth of Jesus, originated.



## PART I

### ON THE TRACK OF THE "BOOK OF THE NATIVITY OF JOHN"

#### I. THE "STICHOMETRY" OF NICEPHORUS

AMONG the apocryphal books catalogued in the *Stichometry* of Nicephorus, Patriarch of Constantinople in the ninth century, appears a work entitled *Of Zacharias the Father of John*. This is one of the few Christian references to any uncanonical book connected with John the Baptist, but the place which it occupies in Nicephorus' list, following an apocryphon *Of Sophonias (Zephaniah) the Prophet*, makes the reference somewhat uncertain. It is possible that the Old Testament prophet Zachariah is really intended, the words "the father of John" being added by a scribe who knew that there were apocryphal stories told of the Baptist's father. In another list of apocryphal books, found appended to some MSS. of the *Quæstiones* of Anastasius of Sinai after the Sixty Books of the Bible, an *Apocalypse of Zacharias* follows an *Apocalypse of Sophonias*. The Zacharias problem, which on the Christian side centres round the saying of Christ in Matthew xxiii. 35, "That upon you may come all the righteous blood shed upon the earth, from the blood of Abel the righteous unto the blood of Zacharias the son of Barachias, whom ye slew between the temple and the altar," will be more fully dealt with later on. Suffice it here to say that even if the book which appears in Nicephorus' list be identified with the *Apocalypse of Zacharias*, there remains the undoubted fact that apocryphal works were in circulation in the early days of the Church in which the father of the Baptist figured prominently. Two well-known examples are the *Book of James* and the *Book of the Genealogy of Mary*. Jerome, in A.D. 398, commenting on the saying of Christ quoted above, writes: "Others will have it that Zachariah the father of John is meant; they prove from some dream of apocryphal writings that he was slain because he

prophesied the coming of the Saviour. This, having no Scriptural authority, can be as readily rejected as proved." Zacharias legends would necessarily involve some account of the Baptist's infancy, and they must therefore represent a considerable part of the evidence for establishing the existence of a *Book of the Nativity of John*.

## II. BERENDTS' SLAVONIC TEXT

Some scholars who have devoted their time to apocryphal writings take the view that the books of Zacharias mentioned in the lists do not refer to the minor prophet of that name, but to the father of John. A. Berendts, who made a study of the Zacharias problem, was confidently of this opinion, and indeed thought that he had found the lost *Book of Zacharias the Father of John* in a Slavonic writing which he translated. The writer has not seen this text, but it is sufficiently summarized by Dr. Montague Rhodes James in *The Lost Apocrypha of the Old Testament*, as follows: "In the fortieth year of Herod's reign, Joseph was warned by the angel Saphodamuel to flee into Egypt, where the family lived twelve months in the house of Alpheus, a man of God.

"The massacre of the Innocents followed. Elizabeth fled with John. Zacharias was questioned about the child, and slain. Elizabeth was sheltered within a rock by Uriel, and fed.

"After four months, Gabriel brought Jesus to the Temple, and Uriel brought John: Michael and Raphael also came; and in the midst appeared God, and the corpse of Zacharias. God breathed life into it. Jesus made a spring of water rise up in the Temple and from it baptized John, and Zacharias. Thereafter Zacharias fell asleep again and was buried by the angels before the altar. Gabriel and Uriel bore away Jesus and John. The story concludes with the weaning of John, and his life in the wilderness, and the return from Egypt."

Berendts is probably wrong in supposing that this late and legendary text was the actual document mentioned by Nicephorus, but it is certainly a corrupt descendant of an early work which may have passed under the name of the Baptist's father, but was in reality a history of the infancy of the Baptist, and which the present writer prefers to call the *Book of the Nativity of John*. The ancient elements in the Slavonic text are (i) the massacre of the infants in Bethlehem; (ii) the flight of Elizabeth into the

wilderness with John and her concealment in a rock (cave); and (iii) the questioning and murder of Zachariah. These incidents are vouched for by several ancient writers, and the fact that they are all Eastern, or are using Eastern texts, shows quite clearly the place of origin of the traditions, which is of great importance.

### III. THE COMMENTARIES OF ISHO'DAD OF MERV

Isho'dad of Merv, the Nestorian Bishop of Ḥadatha about the middle of the ninth century, is one of the latest writers to record the traditions of the Baptist's infancy. In his *Commentaries on the Gospels*,<sup>1</sup> on Matthew iii. 1, "And in those days came John the Baptist," he has the following:

"But how was John removed?"

"Mar Ephraim (S. Ephraim the Syrian) and others say that Elizabeth withdrew him from before the sword of Herod; she had received in a revelation, that she should make him flee to the wilderness. . . .

"Others say that an angel seized him from his mother's side, and neither she nor his father, nor any one else knew the place of his abode.

"Others say, that at one time, our Lord fled before the sword of Herod, and so did His messenger, the one to Egypt, but the other to the wilderness, and the one rode on an ass, but the other on the rush of the wind, like Habakkuk<sup>2</sup> . . .

"Others say, that when Zachariah his father felt the sword of Herod, perhaps the boy was sought; for he was from the border of Bethlehem, although he dwelt in Jerusalem on account of the high priesthood (*sic*), and he took the child and put him on the altar of propitiation, where he had received the conception (annunciation?) by means of the angel. While he was blessing about this in prayer, the angel seized him and took him away to the inner wilderness. But afterwards the Jews inquired of Zachariah about his son, 'Where is the prophet that was born to save Israel from the oppression of the Romans?' and he truthfully replied, 'I do not know.' They answered him cruelly. 'Because thou art envious about the liberation of the people, thou

<sup>1</sup> Translated from the Syriac by Dr. Margaret Dunlop Gibson (Cambridge University Press).

<sup>2</sup> *Bel and the Dragon*, xxxvi.

hast killed thy son, in order that we may not be freed from bondage'; for they expected a Messiah from the wonders that were performed at his conception and at his birth. When Zachariah saw that they would not listen to argument, nor fulfil their vows, and that their madness increased, he ran to take refuge at the altar, as was the custom of the Law, but they came on him between the vestibule and the altar, and there they slaughtered him; that blood remained crying out and bubbling fifty-eight years, until Titus the son of Vespasianus Cæsar; but when they rebelled against Cæsar, and he came with a strong army and subdued the city, he entered the Temple and saw the blood which bubbled and heard the cry; and when he asked and learned about this, he slaughtered all the priests upon that spot, and thereupon the blood was quieted."

It will be noted that Isho'dad's traditions support Berendts' Slavonic text in the main elements of the story, and Isho'dad is confessedly quoting much older writers. The reference to Mar Ephraim (S. Ephraim the Syrian), for instance, carries us back to the fourth century. S. Ephraim's *Gospel Commentaries*, written about A.D. 373, contain the following remark: "Others say, that Zachariah, when his son was demanded of him during the slaughter of the infants, because he had preserved him by flight into the desert, was slain before the altar, as the Lord said." The expression "others say" used by Ephraim as well as Isho'dad points to a still earlier date for the traditions: they were ancient even in the fourth century, and Jerome, another fourth-century writer, as we have already noticed, states that apocryphal writings were current in his day which reported the murder of Zachariah, and identified him with the son of Barachias alluded to by Jesus.

#### IV. THE SOURCES OF ISHO'DAD (INDIRECT SOURCES)

##### *The Baptist's Escape and Concealment*

Isho'dad knows of four ways in which the infant John escaped: (i) A revelation to Elizabeth that she should fly with him into the wilderness; (ii) an angel seizes him from his mother's side; (iii) he is carried off into the wilderness on the rush of the wind; and (iv) an angel takes him off the altar and transports him into the wilderness. All these versions of the Baptist's escape from



Herod can be shown to be ultimately derived from a cycle of Messianic folklore connected with the disappearance and reappearance of the Messiah, particularly as we shall see later with the Messianic prototype, Moses. It should be noted that in Isho'dad's traditions the Baptist figures as the infant Deliverer.

### *The "Apocalypse of John"*

The oldest Christian document which relates the story of the disappearance of the Messiah is the *Book of Revelation*, better called the *Apocalypse of John*. The twelfth chapter, which also begins a new section of this book, opens with the following vision :

"And there appeared a great wonder in heaven ; a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and upon her head a crown of twelve stars : and she being with child cried, travailing in birth, and pained to be delivered. And there appeared another wonder in heaven ; and behold a great red dragon, having seven heads and ten horns, and seven crowns upon his heads. And his tail drew the third part of the stars of heaven, and did cast them to the earth : and the dragon stood before the woman which was ready to be delivered, for to devour her child as soon as it was born. And she brought forth a man-child, who was to rule all nations with a rod of iron : and her child was caught up unto God, and to his throne. And the woman fled into the wilderness, where she hath a place prepared of God, that they should feed her there a thousand two hundred and threescore days.

"And there was war in heaven : Michael and his angels fought against the dragon ; and the dragon fought and his angels, and prevailed not ; neither was their place found any more in heaven. And the great dragon was cast out, that old serpent, called the Devil, and Satan, which deceiveth the whole world : he was cast out into the earth, and his angels were cast out with him. . . . And when the dragon saw that he was cast unto the earth, he persecuted the woman which brought forth the man-child. And to the woman were given two wings of a great eagle, that she might fly into the wilderness, into her place ; where she is nourished for a time, and times, and half a time, from the face of the serpent. And the serpent cast out of his mouth water as a flood after the woman, that he might cause her to be carried away of the flood. And the earth helped the woman ; and the earth opened her mouth,



and swallowed up the flood which the dragon cast out of his mouth. And the dragon was wroth with the woman, and went to make war with the remnant of her seed. . . ." <sup>1</sup>

This vision is very significant, for in it there is set forth on the apocalyptic plane the theme which in the Baptist Infancy traditions (as recorded by Isho'dad and others) is worked out on the historic. To the apocalyptist the woman is Zion, while historically she is Elizabeth. The man-child is the Messiah. The dragon in the apocalyptic sense is the Devil, Satan, or Beliar, the enemy of the Messiah, waiting to devour the child as soon as he is born because he knows that the advent of the Messiah means the overthrow of his unrighteous rule. Historically the dragon is the Roman Empire (Edom) personified in the Infancy narratives by the Edomite Herod, who, becoming aware of the birth of the rightful king, seeks to destroy him and thus avert his own doom. On the apocalyptic plane the child is caught up to heaven, on the historic he is carried off by an angel.

The woman flies into the wilderness to the place prepared for her. On the apocalyptic plane this represents the concealment of the ideal Zion, the Elect Israel, which is preserved from the plagues of judgment, as in Isaiah xxvi. 20: "Come, my people, enter thou into thy chambers, and shut thy doors about thee: hide thyself as it were for a little moment, until the indignation be overpast." On the historic plane, Elizabeth flies into the wilderness, where she is concealed in a mountain and fed by an angel until the persecution caused by the prediction of the Magi is over.

After the war in heaven, for which there is naturally no historic parallel, we have the flight of the woman repeated. She is borne on eagles' wings like the Children of Israel in their escape from Pharaoh, the dragon of Egypt (Ex. xix. 4). Finally, the war of the dragon with the remnant of the woman's seed, which on the apocalyptic plane represents the persecution of the Great Tribulation, finds an historic counterpart in the massacre of the infants by Herod.

The *Apocalypse of John* is, of course, not the direct source of the legends of the Baptist's escape from Herod, but it clearly illustrates the Messianic material out of which those legends were constructed. Another indirect source is a piece of Messianic

<sup>1</sup> Rev. xii. 1-9, 13-17.

folklore found in the Palestinian *Talmud*, which we shall now proceed to quote.

*T. Jer. "Tractate Berachoth" (fol. 5, col. 1)*

"It happened once to a certain Jew, while he was ploughing, that his ox bellowed. A certain Arabian travelling, and hearing the ox bellow, said to the Jew at the plough, Jew, Jew, loose thine oxen, and loose thy ploughs, for the Temple is laid waste. The ox bellowed a second time, whereupon the Arab said to him, Jew, Jew, yoke thine oxen and fit thy ploughs, for King Messiah is born. What is his name? asked the Jew. Menahem, was the answer. And what is the name of his father? Hezekiah, replied the Arabian. But whence is he? From the royal residence of Bethlehem-Judah.

"Away went the Jew, and sold his oxen and plough-shares, and became a seller of infants' swaddling clothes, travelling from town to town. When he came to that city (Bethlehem), all the women bought of him except the mother of Menahem. He heard the voice of the women, saying, Mother of Menahem, mother of Menahem, carry thy son the things that are here being sold. But she replied, May the enemies of Israel be strangled, because on the day that he was born the Temple was laid waste. The Jew then said, But we hoped, that as it was laid waste at his feet, so at his feet it would be rebuilt. She said, I have no money. He replied, Why should this stand in his way? Carry him what you buy here; and if you have no money to-day, after a time I will return and receive it. After some days he came again to that city, and said to her, How fares the infant? And she said, *Since you saw me last, winds and tempests came and snatched him away out of my hands.*"

This curious legend follows a statement by R. Judan that the name of the Messiah was Menahem, and immediately after the story, which appears to be of very early date, we have a comment by R. Bon: "What need have we to learn from an Arabian? Is it not plainly written, 'And Lebanon (the Temple) shall fall by a mighty one?' (Isa. x. 34). And what follows immediately after? 'And there shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse'" (Isa. xi. 1). The Arabians in ancient Jewish society were credited with much the same propensity for telling tall stories as the Americans of our day, and it would be unwise, therefore,

to press the nationality of the bearer of the tidings of the Messiah's birth too far, but it may be remarked that Justin Martyr (*Dial.* lxxvii., lxxviii., etc.) repeatedly says that the Magi who heralded the advent of Christ came from Arabia. Witness also the fact that both the Jewish legend and the Gospel story locate the birth of the Messiah in Bethlehem. The name of the Messiah is given as Menahem the son of Hezekiah, and he is born at the time of the destruction of the Temple. This element in the legend presents some difficulty. It is possible, but not probable, that the reference is to a Menahem who was the son of Judas of Galilee, and who may have been the grandson of Hezekiah, the arch-robber, who was slain by Herod. This Menahem, Josephus tells us (*Wars*, II. xvii. 8), gave himself out to be king during the war with Rome. The legend concludes with the spiriting away of the infant in a way which agrees with one of Isho'dad's descriptions of the manner in which John escaped.

We are justified in bringing forward this Jewish legend as an indirect source, for there are so many points of similarity between it and the material embodied in Isho'dad's *Commentaries* that it affords very strong evidence for the existence of a cycle of Messianic Nativity folklore independent of Christian documents. We have already noted the use of this cycle in the *Apocalypse of John*.

### *Some Additional References*

As we are upon the subject of the concealment of the Messiah as providing the background of ideas on which the Baptist's escape depends, it may be useful to give a few additional references to this theme.

The Midrash *Shir haShirim Rabba* on Cant. ii. 9, "My beloved is like a roe or a young hart," comments as follows: "A roe appears and is hid, appears and is hid again. So our first redeemer (Moses) appeared and was hid, and at length appeared again. So our last redeemer (the Messiah) shall be revealed to them, and shall be hid again from them . . . and shall be revealed again."

The Targumist paraphrases Micah iv. 8, "And thou, Messiah of Israel, who art concealed on account of the offences of the congregation of Zion, to thee shall the kingdom come."

In the *Gospel of John* (vii. 27) the people say: "When the Messiah cometh, no man knoweth whence he is"; and Trypho, the Jew of Justin Martyr's *Dialogue* (viii.), is made quite legitimately

to remark: "But the Messiah, if he has indeed been born and exists anywhere, is unknown, and does not even know himself, and has no power until Elijah comes to anoint him, and make him manifest to all."

## V. THE SOURCES OF ISHO'DAD (INDIRECT SOURCES—*continued*)

### *The Murder of Zacharias*

From Isho'dad's *Commentaries* and the statements of Ephraim and Jerome, it appears that Zachariah the father of John was identified at a very early date with the Zacharias the son of Barachias, whom Jesus said was murdered between the Temple and the altar, and whose blood, with that of the rest of Israel's murdered prophets, was to be avenged on that generation.

The Zacharias problem is extremely complicated owing to the number of persons to whom the Gospel reference may apply. Some scholars regard the reference as a prophecy after the event, and think that the Zacharias in question was one Zacharias the son of Baruch, a rich man of Jerusalem, whom Josephus says (*Wars*, iv. v. 4) was murdered in the midst of the Temple by the Zealots and Idumeans during the war with the Romans.

The *Gospel of the Hebrews* read Jehoiada for Barachias, and this has led other scholars to conclude that Jesus was referring to the Zacharias the son of Jehoiada who was a priest and a prophet, and who, according to 2 *Chronicles* (xxiv. 20-21), was stoned "in the court of the House of the Lord" by order of King Joash.

Others again will have it that the reference is to the post-exilic prophet Zacharias the son of Barachias, who also appears to have been a priest; but there is no tradition that he was murdered.

Recently a suggestion by Dr. Moses Gaster has opened up the way to a satisfactory solution of the Zacharias problem. Dr. Gaster's theory is that chaps. ix. to end of the Old Testament Book of Zachariah the son of Barachiah, which most scholars admit are by another hand, are the work of the murdered prophet Zachariah, who lived a century earlier and whose death is the subject of a Jewish legend which will be quoted below.

The internal evidence shows, as many think, the pre-exilic authorship of the last six chapters of the *Book of Zachariah*, and if they



can be ascribed to Zachariah the son of Jehoiada all difficulties are overcome. We should then have prophecies by Zachariah the son of Barachiah and Zachariah the son of Jehoiada associated in one volume, which would account for the alternative readings in *Matthew* and the *Gospel of the Hebrews*. The murdered Zacharias referred to by Jesus will be the son of Jehoiada, the priest and prophet, and this view is supported by a Jewish legend which is found in both the Palestinian and Babylonian *Talmuds* (T. Jer. *Taanith*, fol. 69, col. 1, 2 ; T. Bab. *Sanhedrin*, fol. 96, col. 2).

"R. Jochanan said, Eighty thousand priests were killed for the blood of Zachariah. R. Judah asked R. Acha, Whereabouts did they kill Zachariah ? in the Court of the Women, or in the Court of Israel ? He answered, Neither in the Court of Israel, nor in the Court of the Women, but in the Court of the Priests. And it was not done to his blood as is done to the blood of a ram or a kid. Concerning the latter it is written, 'And he shall pour out its blood, and cover it with dust.' But concerning the former it is written, 'Her blood is in the midst of her ; she set it upon the top of a rock, she poured it not upon the ground.' And wherefore ? 'That it might cause fury to come up to take vengeance.'

"They committed seven wickednesses in that day. They killed a priest, a prophet, and a judge ; they shed the blood of an innocent man : they polluted the Court : and that day was the Sabbath, and the Day of Atonement. When therefore Nebuzar-adan went up thither, he saw the blood bubbling : so he said to them, What meaneth this ? They said, It is the blood of calves, lambs, and rams, which we have offered on the altar. Bring then, said he, calves, lambs, and rams, that I may try whether this be their blood. They brought them and slew them, but that blood still bubbled, while their blood bubbled not. Declare unto me this matter, said he, or I will tear your flesh with iron rakes. Then said they unto him, This was a priest, a prophet, and a judge, who foretold to Israel all these evils which we have suffered from you, and we rose up against him, and slew him. But I, said he, will appease him. He brought the Rabbis, and slew them upon that blood ; and yet it was not pacified : he brought the children out of the school, and slew them upon it ; and yet it was not quiet : he brought the young priests, and slew them upon it, and yet it was not quiet. So that he slew upon it ninety-four thousand, and yet it was not quiet. He drew near to it himself, and said,

O Zachariah, Zachariah, thou hast destroyed the best of thy people ; would you have me destroy all ? Then it was quiet, and bubbled no more."

It is probable that in this Jewish legend of the murder of Zachariah the son of Jehoiada and the retribution that followed we have the source from which the Baptists drew their description of the murder of Zachariah the father of John and the vengeance of Titus, as preserved by Isho'dad. Isho'dad's direct source is, presumably, the Baptist document or a quotation from it. The period of the Jewish story is the last days of the First Temple, while that of the Baptists concerns the Second Temple, but the Jews themselves were fond of drawing parallels between the two Destructions. The fact that the Baptists have copied the Jewish legend is important as showing the Judaic associations of the sect. As the story stands in Isho'dad's *Commentaries*, it cannot be of very early date, and was most certainly an addition made probably in the opening years of the second century. Another version of the murder appears in the *Book of James* which occupies our next section, but it is a critical question whether in the original *Book of the Nativity of John* there was any statement that Zachariah was murdered.

## VI. THE SOURCES OF ISHO'DAD (DIRECT SOURCES)<sup>1</sup>

### *The "Book of James"*

The *Gospel Commentaries* of Ephraim have already been mentioned as one of the direct sources from which Isho'dad drew his particulars of the Baptist's escape from Herod and the murder

<sup>1</sup> Since this section was written, there has been brought to my notice a hitherto unknown *Life of John the Baptist*, composed by Serapion, an Egyptian bishop, circa A.D. 385-395. It appears to have been another of Isho'dad's direct sources. Serapion gives the story of Titus, and the bubbling of the blood of Zachariah in the same way as Isho'dad, and also the death of Salome, the daughter of Herodias, while dancing on the ice, which is found elsewhere in Isho'dad's *Commentaries*. The chief importance of the new source is that it provides us with another intermediate witness to the Baptist Infancy legends. The text has been edited and translated by Dr. A. Mingana from two MSS. in his own collection. The language is Garshūni (Arabic in Syriac characters), but a Greek original is suspected. For the sake of completeness I have given that part of the narrative which covers the childhood of the Baptist in an Appendix. By Dr. Mingana's kind permission I have availed myself of his translation, as published in the *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, July 1927.

of Zachariah, while the indirect sources which we have given show that Isho'dad must have had access to other documents at present unknown to us. Jerome refers us to certain apocryphal writings for further information, and it can hardly be doubted that one of these was the ancient Infancy Gospel known as the *Book of James* (in modern times as the *Protevangelium*). The latter part of this work contains the story of the Baptist's escape, and the murder of Zachariah (*Book of James*, xxii.-xxiv.) :

"And when Herod knew that he had been mocked by the Magi, in a rage he sent murderers, saying to them : Slay all the male children from two years old and under. . . . And Elizabeth, having heard that they were searching for John, took him and went up into the hill-country, and kept looking where to conceal him. And there was no place of concealment. And Elizabeth, groaning with a loud voice, says : O mountain of God, receive mother and child. And immediately the mountain was cleft, and received her. And a light shone about them, for an angel of the Lord was with them, watching over them.

"And Herod searched for John, and sent officers to Zachariah, saying : Where hast thou hid thy son ? And he, answering, said to them : I am the servant of God in holy things, and I sit constantly in the Temple of the Lord : I do not know where my son is. And the officers went away, and reported all these things to Herod. And Herod was enraged, and said : His son is destined to be king over Israel. And he sent to him again, saying : Tell the truth ; where is thy son ? for thou knowest that thy life is in my hand. And Zachariah said : I am God's witness, if thou sheddest my blood ; for the Lord will receive my spirit, because thou sheddest innocent blood at the vestibule of the Temple of the Lord. And Zachariah was murdered about daybreak. And the children of Israel did not know that he had been murdered.

"But at the hour of the salutation the priests went away, and Zachariah did not come forth to meet them with a blessing, according to his custom. And the priests stood waiting for Zachariah to salute him at the prayer, and to glorify the Most High. And he still delaying, they were all afraid. But one of them ventured to go in, and he saw clotted blood beside the altar ; and he heard a voice saying : Zachariah has been murdered, and his blood shall not be wiped up until his avenger come. And hearing this saying, he was afraid, and went out and told it to the priests. And they



ventured in, and saw what had happened; and the fretwork of the Temple made a wailing noise, and was rent from the top even to the bottom. And they found not his body, but they found his blood turned into stone. And they were afraid, and went out and reported to the people that Zachariah had been murdered. And all the tribes of the people heard, and mourned, and lamented for him three days and three nights. And after the three days, the priests consulted as to whom they should put in his place; and the lot fell upon Simeon."

A comparison of this passage with Isho'dad leaves no room for doubt that it represents one of his direct sources. As a consequence, the seat of our inquiry after the lost *Book of the Nativity of John* has to be shifted back from the ninth to the second century, the earliest date at which the *Book of James* is quoted by any known writer. Henceforth we can dispense with Isho'dad, faithfully as he has served us, and confine ourselves to more ancient witnesses.

## VII. COMPOSITION OF THE "BOOK OF JAMES"

The *Book of James* is first mentioned by name in the third century by Origen, who refers to it along with the *Gospel of Peter* as supporting the view that the brethren of Jesus were the sons of Joseph by a former wife. We can, however, with some assurance carry the date of the book back to the first quarter of the second century, for Justin Martyr, writing before the middle of that century, has several verbal and incidental agreements with it. The *Book of James* may be said to be the parent of all the Christian Infancy Gospels; it is also the least legendary in form. What makes this book of more than common interest to the student of Christian origins is the fact that the author, whoever he may be, is not wholly dependent on our canonical Gospels for his information. He tells us that Jesus was born in a cave near Bethlehem, and also of the escape of John from the massacre of the infants, and the murder of Zachariah.

The subscription to the book contains all that we know of its authorship. This reads as follows: "And I James that wrote this history in Jerusalem, a tumult having arisen when Herod died, withdrew myself to the wilderness until the tumult in Jerusalem ceased, glorifying the Lord, who had given me the gift

and the wisdom to write this history." No reliance can, of course, be placed on such a statement, it is merely a literary device designed to give the impression of antiquity to the contents of the book.

An examination of these contents shows quite clearly what is the purpose of the author. As we have it at present, and it does not appear to have suffered any material change since the third century, the *Book of James* is in reality the *Book of the Nativity of Mary*. In this it differs from a number of the later Infancy Gospels, whose purpose was to fill in the silent years of the life of Jesus. The significance of this fact for our inquiry will be shown shortly. It may be mentioned that we actually have another document substantially the same as the first half of the *Book of James*, which goes by the name of the *Gospel of the Nativity of Mary*; and still another document, the *Gospel of pseudo-Matthew*, in which the birth and infancy of the Virgin Mary are related.

Before we pass on to the next and most important stage of our investigation it may be as well to pause here in order to summarize briefly the evidence adduced in the previous sections. This will serve both to refresh the reader's memory, and to give additional force to what is to follow.

### VIII. RECAPITULATION OF PREVIOUS EVIDENCE

Our investigations opened with calling attention to an apocryphal work in the *Stichometry* of Nicephorus entitled *Of Zacharias the Father of John*. This work, though it may have been inaccurately described, disclosed the existence of a cycle of tradition in which the father of the Baptist played a prominent part. In support of this view a statement of Jerome was quoted, and we saw that in a late Slavonic text translated by A. Berendts a document embodying these Zacharias traditions actually existed, though in a very corrupt form. A summary of the contents of the Slavonic text showed that the Zacharias traditions were connected with legends of the infancy of John the Baptist, and centred round the infant John's escape from the massacre of the babes in Bethlehem by transportation into the wilderness.

We next discovered that in the *Gospel Commentaries* of Isho'dad of Merv the various forms of the legend of the Baptist's escape from Herod had been very fully preserved, and we set to work to

trace the sources of Isho'dad's information. We found that the background of ideas underlying the legends was a cycle of Jewish Messianic folklore dealing with the disappearance and reappearance of the Messiah, and brought forward evidence from two such widely separate writings as the Christian *Apocalypse of John* and the *Talmud*.

The traditions of the murder of Zacharias, which play an important part in the Baptist infancy legends, were next discussed, and we saw that for these also Isho'dad is indirectly dependent on Jewish folklore. Finally, in the second-century Infancy Gospel known as the *Book of James*, we found what is probably the oldest source of Isho'dad's information.

We have now collected together a considerable body of material covering many centuries testifying to the existence of a cycle of legend associated with the infancy of John the Baptist. Furthermore, in this cycle of legend it is presumed that John is the Messiah. In Isho'dad's traditions the Jews inquire of Zachariah about his son, "*Where is the prophet that was born to save Israel from the oppression of the Romans?*" and in the *Book of James*, Herod says of Zachariah, "*His son is destined to be king over Israel.*"

It would seem on the basis of this evidence that there is some justification for presuming the existence of a lost Infancy Gospel of the Baptist emanating from the Baptist sect. The traditions quoted have centred round the escape of John from the massacre of the babes at Bethlehem: but the story of the massacre presupposes the visit of the Magi, as in the *Book of James*; and the visit of the Magi necessarily involves an account of the birth of the child who is heralded as the Messiah. Now, quite clearly, in the traditions this child is John and not Jesus. Isho'dad tells us distinctly of John that "*they expected a Messiah from the wonders that were performed at his conception and at his birth.*" We thus have all the requirements of an Infancy Gospel of the Baptist. Of the wonders that were performed at the conception and birth of John we should have no means of knowing were it not that, fortunately, they have been quoted in detail by the author of the *Gospel of Luke*. With the help of this Gospel, we are enabled to carry our investigations a stage further.

## IX. THE "GOSPEL OF LUKE"

The first two chapters of the *Gospel of Luke* which contain his account of the births of John and Jesus have provided commentators with a baffling problem. The style of these chapters is intensely Judaic, and utterly at variance with the rest of the Gospel, or, to put it more accurately, with the Gospel proper, which obviously commences at chapter iii. The solution which appeals to the present writer is that in the first two chapters of the *Gospel of Luke* we have a composite document made up of the birth stories of two Messiahs, John and Jesus, though it is intentionally made to appear as if the former were only the forerunner of the latter. Both John and Jesus are divinely announced, and miraculously born; both are the topic of conversation of the whole countryside; both are declared by the spirit of prophecy to be saviours of Israel. The devices used by the writer of Luke to fuse the narratives together, and to get rid of the Messianic claims put forward by the disciples of John on behalf of their master, are readily discerned. His aim is clearly polemical. By incorporating a large part of the nativity stories of John into his own account of the birth of Jesus, he seeks to deal a death-blow at the Baptist sect. It should be remembered that it is this very writer who, in his *Acts of the Apostles*, tells us of the conversion of certain disciples of John, and particularly of the Baptist Apollos (Acts xviii. 24, xix. 1).

Luke explains that Mary and Elizabeth were related to one another, and although it was true that the angel Gabriel had announced the birth of John, yet, six months later, the same angel had appeared at Nazareth and announced the birth of Jesus. Moreover, when Mary had visited her cousin Elizabeth, the babe John had borne testimony to Jesus by leaping in his mother's womb. One may not press this point too far, but there is a suspicion that the account of Mary and Joseph coming from Nazareth to Bethlehem on account of the Census, and of Jesus being born while they were temporarily resident there, is also meant to counteract the Messianic claims put forward on behalf of John, who was actually born there. Again, after the circumcision of Jesus, Simeon and Anna are introduced that they may prophesy that he is the Messiah, to neutralize the similar prophecy made by Zachariah after the circumcision of his son John. Finally, of both children



we read, "And the child grew, and waxed strong in spirit" (Luke i. 80, ii. 40).

Unfortunately for the Lukan narrative there is no evidence to show that John and Jesus were related, or that they were nearly of an age. Such evidence as there is in the Gospels points quite the other way: that John did not know Jesus (John i. 31); and that he was a considerably older man (Matt. xi. 12); and even that Jesus was not born in Bethlehem, but Nazareth (Matt. xiii. 54; John i. 46, vii. 42). In spite of all this, we should be very thankful to the writer of the *Gospel of Luke* for having substantially preserved to us the first part of a *Book of the Nativity of John*, of which Isho'dad's *Commentaries*, the *Book of James*, and other writings have preserved the conclusion. The two sections dovetail into one another, and are written in the same Judaic style; while the same prominence and character are given to Zachariah, the father of John, in each.

After Luke i. 79, in the sequence of events in a *Book of the Nativity of John*, there would follow the visit of the Magi, but it would have spoiled everything if the wise men had come to Bethlehem, and done homage to the Messiah, and Herod had ordered the massacre of the infants, all before Jesus was born. It was too good a story to be missed, and the writer of Luke made shift to insert it after the adoration of the shepherds and before the circumcision of Jesus—that is, between verses 20 and 21 of chapter ii., from whence it was expunged owing to criticism of the impossible chronology. According to Tertullian (*De carne Christi*, ii.), this was the order of events known to Marcion.

The writer of Luke is not the only evangelist to utilize the nativity stories of John for polemical purposes. The writer of the *Gospel of Matthew* is equally guilty, though in another way. Luke's method is, as we have seen, to set down the wonderful birth of John and to counteract its influence by repeating the incidents with more miraculous detail in favour of Jesus. Matthew chooses a different method, but with the same motive. This writer refuses to record the birth of John at all. Instead of which, he adapts the history of the nativity of John, including the Magi incident, and turns it into a history of the birth of Jesus. Matthew's narrative of the nativity of Jesus is much closer to Luke's narrative of the birth of John than it is to Luke's narrative of the birth of Jesus. If this had only been realized by Christian scholars, it

would have saved them centuries of hopeless attempts at harmonizing the different accounts of the nativity of Jesus found in these two Gospels.

We shall have more to say of the *Gospel of Matthew* in a subsequent section, but for the present we must resume our discussion of the *Book of James* at the point where we left off at the end of section VII.

## X. PURPOSE OF THE "BOOK OF JAMES"

In the *Book of James* and its successors, the *Gospel of pseudo-Matthew* and the *Gospel of the Nativity of Mary*, we have the first Christian attempts to glorify the mother of Jesus. These writings record the theory advanced in the first quarter of the second century that Mary was a perpetual virgin, and that the brothers of Jesus were really the sons of Joseph by a former wife. Moreover, in the same documents the nativity of the Virgin is set down in great detail. We have the story of Mary's parents, Joachim and Anna, of her marvellous conception, birth, and upbringing. Whence did the Christian author derive his information? The answer is to be found in the stories themselves. A casual glance at the Mary legends shows us that there has been a deliberate change in the characters. Joachim, Anna, and the infant Mary are in reality Zachariah, Elizabeth, and the infant John. The Book of the Nativity of Mary, which occupies the first half of the *Book of James*, is nothing else but the Christian overworking of a *Book of the Nativity of John*. In proof of this statement we offer the following comparisons between the John and Mary legends, taking our quotations concerning the latter principally from the *Book of James* and the *Gospel of the Nativity of Mary*.

### *Nativity of Mary*

"(Mary's) father was named Joachim, and her mother Anna. . . . Their life was guileless and right before the Lord, and irreproachable and pious before men. . . . For about twenty years they lived in their own house, a chaste married life,

### *Nativity of John*

"There was . . . a certain priest named Zacharias, of the course of Abia: and his wife was of the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances

*Nativity of Mary*

without having any children (because Anna was barren)" (*Nativity of Mary*, chap. i.).

"Now . . . on a certain day when he (Joachim) was alone, an angel of the Lord stood by him in a great light. And when he was disturbed at his appearance, the angel who had appeared to him restrained his fear, saying: Fear not, Joachim, nor be disturbed by my appearance; for I am the angel of the Lord sent by Him to thee to tell thee that thy prayers have been heard, and that thy charitable deeds have gone up into His presence. . . . Accordingly, thy wife, Anna, will bring forth a daughter to thee, and thou shalt call her name Mary: she shall be consecrated to the Lord from her infancy, and she shall be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from her mother's womb. She shall neither eat nor drink any unclean thing" (*Nativity of Mary*, chap. iii.).

"And her months were fulfilled, and in the ninth month Anna brought forth (a daughter) . . . and on the eighth day she called her name Mary" (*Book of James*, v.).

*Nativity of John*

of the Lord blameless. And they had no child, because that Elizabeth was barren, and they were both now well stricken in years" (Luke i. 5-7).

"And there appeared unto him (Zacharias) an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. And when Zacharias saw him, he was troubled, and fear fell upon him. But the angel said unto him, Fear not, Zacharias; for thy prayer is heard; and thy wife Elizabeth shall bear thee a son, and thou shalt call his name John. And thou shalt have joy and gladness; and many shall rejoice at his birth. For he shall be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink; and he shall be filled with the Holy Ghost, even from his mother's womb" (Luke i. 11-15).

"Now Elizabeth's full time came that she should be delivered; and she brought forth a son. . . . And it came to pass on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child;



*Nativity of Mary*

"And Anna made a song to the Lord God, saying: I will sing to the Lord my God, for he hath looked upon me, and hath taken away the reproach of mine enemies (etc.)" (*Book of James*, vi.).

"Then Anna, filled with the Holy Ghost, said before them all: The Lord Almighty, the God of Hosts, being mindful of His word, hath visited His people with a good and holy visitation, to bring down the hearts of the Gentiles who were rising against us, and turn them to Himself. He hath opened His ears to our prayers: He hath kept away from us the exulting of all our enemies (etc.)" (*pseudo-Matthew*, chap. v.).

"And the virgin of the Lord advanced in age and virtues" (*Nativity of Mary*, chap. vii.).

*Nativity of John*

and they called him (John)" (Luke i. 57, 59).

"And Mary (Elizabeth?) said, My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour. For he hath regarded the low estate of his handmaiden (etc.)" (Luke i. 46-48).

"And his father Zacharias was filled with the Holy Ghost, and prophesied, saying, Blessed be the Lord God of Israel; for he hath visited and redeemed his people . . . as he spake by the mouth of his holy prophets, which have been since the world began: that we should be saved from our enemies, and from the hand of all that hate us; (etc.)" (Luke i. 67-68, 70-71).

"And the child grew, and waxed strong in spirit" (Luke i. 80).

## XI. THE NATIVITY OF JESUS IN THE "GOSPEL OF MATTHEW"

The author of the nativity stories of Mary has based his account on a *Book of the Nativity of John*, as we have shown. We shall now proceed to substantiate our statement that the author of the *Gospel of Matthew* has similarly made a *Book of the Nativity of John* his basis for the story of the birth of Jesus. It is unnecessary to set out the text in full, as the Reader can consult his New Testament. The points of agreement between the two histories are

quite clear. Joseph, like Zachariah, is a just man. An angel of the Lord appears to each, bidding him not to fear, and announcing the wonderful child his wife is about to bear. In Matthew, the child is conceived of the Holy Ghost; but the reading, "she shall bear thee a son" (Matt. i. 21, in the Sinaitic Syriac MS.), and another reading a little further back in the same text, "Joseph begat Jesus," makes it possible that originally the Matthean narrative only stated that the child should be filled with the Holy Ghost from his mother's womb, in agreement with the nativity story of John. The last clause of verse 21, "for he shall save his people from their sins," is also open to doubt. The original text probably read, "from their enemies," or, "from the oppression of the Romans," as in Luke i. 74 and Isho'dad's *Commentaries*, and was toned down when political hopes were disappointed.

The rest of Matthew's account of the infancy of Jesus is parallel to that of the Baptist. In both we have the visit of the Magi, the massacre of the babes in Bethlehem, and the flight; except that the former escapes to Egypt instead of to the desert. The parallel and the difference are noted by Isho'dad: "Others say, that at one time, our Lord fled before the sword of Herod, and so did His messenger, the one to Egypt, but the other to the wilderness; and the one rode on an ass, but the other on the rush of the wind."

While we are on the subject of the birth of Jesus, it is worth recording that in the Lukan account there is an annunciation to Mary, and so in the *Book of James*, and elsewhere, there is an annunciation to Anna. The speeches of the angelic messenger to Joseph in Matthew, and to Mary in Luke, are so much alike that they must spring from a common tradition. Indeed, in the *Book of James*, and Justin's *Dialogue with Trypho*, there are harmonistic readings. All these points are accounted for on the supposition that a *Book of the Nativity of John* is the underlying document.

The Gospel narratives naturally tell us nothing of the miraculous feeding of John while concealed in the mountain of God, but the nativity stories of Mary tell us that she was concealed in the Temple, where she received food from the hand of an angel. The writer of Luke may be echoing the legend when he states that as a child Jesus disappeared, and His parents sought Him sorrowing; finding Him at last after three days (the mystic three and a half) in the

Temple, where He surprisedly asks them, "Wist ye not that I must be in my Father's House?"

Having dealt as fully as was necessary with the Christian evidence we shall devote our concluding sections to the John legends as they are found in the Mandæan *Book of John*, and learn what we can from the descendants of the Baptist's disciples.

## XII. THE "SIDRĀ D'YAHYĀ" (BOOK OF JOHN)

In recent years there has become available for students of Christian origins and mystic lore a strange literature preserved by a little understood and obscure group of sectaries whose dwelling-place for centuries has been on the banks of the lower Euphrates. This group, which goes by the name of Mandæans (Gnostics), claims to be the lineal descendants of the ancient Baptists. By the patient labour of Professor Mark Lidzbarski, the principal books of the Mandæans have been translated into German from the Mandæan language, a dialect of Aramaic, and of these the *Sidrā d'Yahyā* (*Book of John*) is by far the most important for our present purpose, as it contains all that the Mandæans have preserved of the birth of John the Baptist. By the courtesy of my friend, Mr. G. R. S. Mead, I am able to quote from his English version of the John passages,<sup>1</sup> and I am further indebted to him for explanations of some of the obscure expressions found in this ancient document.

The *Sidrā d'Yahyā* was written, or at any rate redacted, after the Mohammedan conquest, but the material is much older. While having every appearance of being independent of Christian tradition, it confirms the John nativity stories as preserved in Christian writings, and supplies the best possible proof that the *Book of the Nativity of John* had a real existence. The Mandæan legends of the birth of John are found in sections 18 and 32 of the *Sidrā d'Yahyā*, but the former is of such length and contains so much irrelevant matter that we shall content ourselves with quotations of the essential passages.

### *The Annunciation* ("Book of John," § 18)

"A child was planted out of the height, a mystery revealed in Jerusalem. The priests saw dreams; chill seized on their children, chill seized on Jerusalem."

<sup>1</sup> See G. R. S. Mead, *The Gnostic Baptizer*, Watkins, 1924.

(One of the priests relates to his fellow-priests a vision that he has seen): "In my vision of the night I beheld, [I beheld] in my vision. When I lay there, I slept not and rested not, and sleep came not to me by night. I slept not and rested not, [and I beheld] that a star appeared and stood over Enishbai (*Elizabeth*). Fire burned in old father Zakhriā (i.e. *he was filled with the spirit of prophecy*); three heaven lights appeared (cf. *the three Magi*). The sun sank and the lights arose. Fire lit up the house of the people (*synagogue*), smoke rose over the Temple. A quaking quaked in the Throne-chariot, so that Earth removed from her seat. A star flew down into Judæa, a star flew down into Jerusalem. The sun appeared by night, and the moon rose by day."

(*The priests are dismayed at the vision, and the High Priest Eliezer is advised to send to Lilyukh (Elijah?) for an interpretation. Lilyukh interprets the vision and expounds it in a letter*); "In it he says to them: Woe unto you, all you priests, for Enishbai shall bear a child. Woe unto you, ye rabbis, for a child shall be born in Jerusalem. Woe unto you, ye teachers and pupils, for Enishbai shall bear a child. Woe unto you, Mistress Torah (*the Law*), for Yohānā shall be born in Jerusalem. Lilyukh writes unto them in the letter and says to them: The star, that came and stood over Enishbai: a child will be planted out of the height from above; he comes and will be given to Enishbai. The fire, that burned in old father Zakhriā; Yohānā will be born in Jerusalem."

(*The High Priest Eliezer receives the interpretation and shows it to Zachariah. Zachariah disbelieves the promise, and asks*): "Where is there a dead man who becomes living again, that Enishbai should bear a child? . . . It is two-and-twenty years to-day that I have seen no wife. Nay, neither through me nor through you will Enishbai bear a child."

(*The priests chide Zachariah for his unbelief and enlighten him on his descent from Moses. He is come of a race of prophets, and it cannot be that a prophet should perish out of Jerusalem. John will indeed be born and will be called a prophet in Jerusalem.*)

The birth and infancy of John are not recorded in this division, which confines itself to the prophetic annunciation with incidental details. In section 32, however, particulars of the nativity and the escape of John are related by himself, and these we shall now proceed to quote in full.



*The Nativity and Escape ("Book of John," § 32)*

"My father, says Yahyā, was ninety and nine and my mother eighty and eight years old. Out of the basin of Jordan (*the River of Life*) they (*the angels*) took me. They bore me up and laid me in the womb of Enishbai. Nine months, said they, thou shalt stay in her womb, as do all other children. No wise woman (*mid-wife*), said he, brought me into the world in Judæa, and they have not cut my cord in Jerusalem. They made for me no picture of lies, and for me hung up no bell of deceit (*i.e. birth amulets*). I was born from Enishbai in the region of Jerusalem.

"The region of Jerusalem quakes and the wall of the priests rocks. Elizar, the great house, stands there and his body trembles. The Jews gather together, come unto old father Zakhriā and they speak to him: O old father Zakhriā, thou art to have a son. Tell us now, what name shall we give him? Shall we give him for name 'Yaḳif of Wisdom,' that he may teach the Book in Jerusalem? Or shall we give him for name 'Zatan the Pillar,' so that the Jews may swear by him and commit no deceit?

"When Enishbai heard this, she cried out and she said: Of all these names which you name, will I not give him one; but the name Yahyā-Yōhānā<sup>1</sup> will I give him, [the name] which Life's self has given unto him.

"When the Jews heard this, they were filled with wicked anger against her and said: What weapon shall we make ready for [a certain] one and his mother, that he be slain by our hand?

"When Anōsh, the treasure (*the divine Enoch?*), heard this he took the child and brought it to Parwan (*Paran?*), the white mountain, to Mount Parwan on which sucklings and little ones on holy drink are reared up.

"[There I remained] until I was two and twenty years old. I learned there the whole of my wisdom and made fully my own the whole of my discourse. They clothed me with vestures of glory and veiled me with cloud-veils. They wound round me a girdle, of [living] water a girdle, which shone beyond measure and glistened. They set me within a cloud, a cloud of splendour, and in the seventh hour of a Sunday they brought me to the Jerusalem

<sup>1</sup> Both names stand for John, but the first is the Arabic form while the second is Mandæan.

region. Then cried a voice in Judæa, a crying proclaimed in Jerusalem. They call out: What woman had a son, who then was stolen? What woman has made for him a vow and been heedless about it? What woman had a son, who was stolen? Let her come and see after her son.

"Who told Battai, who instructed Battai, who told Battai to go and say to Enishbai: A youth has come to Judæa, a prophet has come to Jerusalem. A youth has come to Judæa; his guardian angel stands by him. His mouth is like thee and his lips [like] his father, old father Zakhriā. His eyes are like thee and his brows [like] his father, old father Zakhriā. His nose is like thee and his hands [like] his father, old father Zakhriā.

"When Enishbai heard this, she hurried out veil-less. When old father Zakhriā saw her thus, he wrote her a bill of divorcement. The Sun down-murmured from heaven and the Moon from its place mid the stars. The Sun opened his mouth and spake to old father Zakhriā in Jerusalem: Old father Zakhriā, thou great dotard (?), who has grown old and lost his wits, like an Arab whom his *kismet* has forsaken.<sup>1</sup> A youth has come to Judæa, a prophet has come to Jerusalem. A youth has come to Judæa; why dost thou send Enishbai away?

"When the youth saw her alone, he set himself free and fell down from the cloud. He set himself free and fell down from the cloud and kissed the mouth of Enishbai. When Anōsh, the treasure, saw him [do this], he spake unto Yahyā in Jerusalem: Stands it for thee written in thy book, is it declared unto thee on thy page, to kiss her alone, on the mouth?—Thereon answered Yahyā and spake unto Anōsh, the treasure, in Jerusalem: Nine months I abode in her womb, so long as all other children abide there, without any reluctance on her part; therefore is it no charge against me now to kiss her alone, on the mouth. Nay, hail and again hail to the man who repays father and mother in full. A man who recompenses father and mother, has not the like in the world.

"When Yahyā said this, Anōsh, the treasure, knew that Yahyā is wise. Thereon Anōsh, the treasure, spake to the Sun in Jerusalem: Take for me care of the youth, the Man, who is sent by the King. Take for me care of the youth, until we ask for him.

<sup>1</sup> Mr. Mead suggests that this phrase is a late interpolation, but it does not read like an interpolation.



Then Anōsh, the treasure, spake to the Moon in Jerusalem : Take for me care of the youth, the Man, who is sent by the King. Take for me care of the youth, until we ask for him.

"Life is exalted and is victorious, and victorious is the Man who has come hither."

### XIII. COMMENTS ON THE MANDÆAN TRADITION

A comparison of the Mandæan tradition of the nativity of John the Baptist with the Christian tradition as preserved in the *Gospel of Luke* and the *Book of James* shows that while there is a substantial agreement in the order of events the character of the narratives differs so considerably as to preclude the possibility of them being taken from one and the same document. The Mandæan account is written in the apocalyptic style. It knows nothing of Herod, and the political *motif* is altogether absent. The Jews seek the death of the child solely on account of his name, which is a very weak concept. John is rescued by a heavenly being and learns his wisdom, and indeed becomes an initiate into the divine mysteries during his sojourn on the holy mount. All this savours of Gnostic ideas and points to the time (late second and third century) when Baptists, Samaritans, and Nazarenes were sinking their differences and finding consolation for their disappointed political hopes in mystic speculations. The Christian account, on the other hand, lays stress on the politico-Messianic aspect, and though full of the miraculous, it is free from mystical embellishments. The *Book of the Nativity of John* as preserved by Christian writers is certainly the older form of the narrative, for it dates before the first quarter of the second century, while the Mandæan account seems to depend on a text which must have been composed at least a century later.

The falling off in the political hope and the increase of mysticism among the followers of the Baptist which reflects itself in the second version of the nativity of John may be equally discerned in the Nazarene treatment of the history of Jesus. In the late second and third century Nazarene Gnostics could relate how Jesus, after His ascension, returned to earth again and taught His disciples the mysteries of the Kingdom for the space of eleven years. New doctrines of Jesus and sayings of His confirming Gnostic tenets were published at this period in works such as the

*Pistis Sophia*, the *Preaching of Peter*, and various Apocryphal Gospels.

Certain passages in the Mandæan tradition, which deals with the mystic side of the Messianic advent, offer, as might be expected, points of resemblance to Christian and Jewish mystic writings dealing with the same subject, and it may be as well briefly to allude to these by way of comment on the Mandæan narrative.

The birth of John in the *Sidrā d'Yahyā*, if not a Virgin Birth, is not far from it, for the child is "planted out of the height" and "laid in the womb of Enishbai." We are reminded of the statement in the *Gospel of John* that "the Word became flesh," and of the prophecy of the Jewish Sibyl who declares that "then shall God send from the sun a king" (Book III. i. 653). The Gnostic doctrine of the "Descent of the Saviour" has been interwoven with the original account of the birth of John as a child of his parents' old age.

A star heralds the advent of the Baptist, and its appearance is accompanied by various celestial and terrestrial phenomena. S. Ignatius, in his *Epistle to the Ephesians*, writes in a somewhat similar strain of a star which "made manifest to the ages" the birth of Jesus. "A star shone forth in the heaven above all the stars; and its light was unutterable, and its strangeness caused amazement; and all the rest of the constellations with the sun and moon formed themselves into a chorus about the star; but the star itself far outshone them all; and there was perplexity to know whence came this strange appearance which was so unlike them." In the *Book of James*, Herod asks the Magi, "What sign have you seen in reference to the king that has been born?" And they reply, "We have seen a star of great size shining among these stars, and obscuring their light, so that the stars did not appear; and we thus knew that a king has been born in Israel."

John is born without the ministration of a midwife, and this also agrees with the birth of Jesus as recorded in the *Book of James*. A curious passage in one of the so-called *Odes of Solomon* (Ode xix.) is to the same effect. "The Spirit opened the womb of the Virgin and she received conception and brought forth; and the Virgin became a mother with many mercies; and she travailed and brought forth a son, without incurring pain; and because she was

not sufficiently prepared, and she had not sought a midwife (for He brought her to bear), she brought forth, as if she were a man (or, 'as it were a man'), of her own will." S. Ephraim in his *Gospel Commentaries* mentions the painless birth, "Mary neither suffered, as a woman, nor felt the birth-pang in bringing forth, as a virgin."

Part of section 32 tells how Anōsh, the treasure, rescues the child from death and brings it to "the white mountain, to Mount Parwan on which sucklings and little ones on holy drink are reared up," where it remains twenty-two years, until completely initiated into the heavenly wisdom. The *Odes of Solomon*, which are probably of Nazarene-Gnostic origin, again seem to contain parallel ideas. Ode xxxv. and part of Ode xxxvi. run together read as follows: "The dew of the Lord in quietness He distilled upon me and the cloud of peace He caused to rise over my head, which guarded me continually; it was to me for salvation: everything was shaken and they were affrighted; and there came forth from them a smoke and a judgment; and I was keeping quiet in the order of the Lord: more than shelter was He to me, and more than foundation. And I was carried like a child by his mother: and He gave me milk, the dew of the Lord: and I grew great by His bounty, and rested in His perfection, and I spread out my hands in the lifting up of my soul: and I was made right with the Most High, and I was redeemed with Him. I rested on the Spirit of the Lord: and the Spirit raised me on high: and made me stand on my feet in the height of the Lord, before His perfection and His glory, while I was praising Him by the composition of His songs. The Spirit brought me forth before the face of the Lord: and, although a son of man, I was named the Illuminate, the Son of God: while I praised amongst the praising ones, and great was I amongst the mighty ones."

These are all the points which need be noted here, as the sources of the *Book of the Nativity of John*, and the origin of these Messianic birth legends, both of John and Jesus, are fully dealt with in Part III. We can now conclude the present Part, having set before the Reader such evidence as we hope will prove to his satisfaction that the *Book of the Nativity of John* is no imaginary document, but one which had a real existence, whose recovery is of vital consequence for a right understanding of one of the most baffling problems in Christology. Part II. carries us a stage

further, being devoted to an attempted restoration of the more ancient form of the lost book. Viewed as a continuous narrative, instead of broken up among a number of authors who reproduce fragments, the work almost authenticates itself apart from the evidence which has preceded it.





## PART II

### CONJECTURAL RESTORATION OF THE “BOOK OF THE NATIVITY OF JOHN”

#### THE “BOOK OF THE NATIVITY OF JOHN”

(It should be clearly understood that the following restoration of this lost document is conjectural and not critical. No reliance should be placed either on the phraseology or the exact sequence of the narrative. The restoration is based on the evidence brought forward in Part I., and although additions and omissions may sometimes occur, the general nature of the contents is guaranteed by that evidence and may be confidently accepted. It will be seen that the book is a coherent whole. The style is Judaic throughout, and a Hebrew or Aramaic original is probably to be inferred.—EDITOR.)

THERE was in the days of Herod, the king of Judæa, a certain priest named Zachariah, of the course of Abiah : and his wife was of the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless. And they had no child, because that Elizabeth was barren, and they both were now well stricken in years.

And it came to pass, that while he executed the priest's office before God in the order of his course, according to the custom of the priest's office, his lot was to burn incense when he went into the Temple of the Lord. And the whole multitude of the people were praying without at the time of incense. And there appeared unto him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. And when Zachariah saw him, he was troubled, and fear fell upon him. But the angel said unto him, Fear not, Zachariah : for thy prayer is heard ; and thy wife Elizabeth shall bear thee a son, and thou shalt call his name John. And thou shalt have joy and gladness ; and many shall rejoice at his birth. For he shall be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink ; and he shall be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. And many of the

children of Israel shall he turn to the Lord their God. And he shall go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just ; to make ready for the Lord a perfected people. And Zachariah said unto the angel, Whereby shall I know this ? for I am an old man, and my wife well stricken in years. And the angel answering said unto him, I am Gabriel, that stand in the presence of God ; and am sent to speak unto thee, and to show thee these glad tidings. And, behold, thou shalt be dumb, and not able to speak, until the day that these things shall be performed, because thou believest not my words, which shall be fulfilled in their season.

And the people waited for Zachariah, and marvelled that he tarried so long in the Temple. And when he came out, he could not speak unto them : and they perceived that he had seen a vision in the Temple : for he beckoned unto them, and remained speechless. And it came to pass, that, as soon as the days of his ministration were accomplished, he departed to his own house.

And after those days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and hid herself five months, saying, Thus hath the Lord dealt with me in the days wherein He looked on me, to take away my reproach among men. And she said, My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit rejoiceth in God my Saviour. For He hath regarded the low estate of His handmaiden : for, behold, henceforth all generations shall call me blessed. For He that is mighty hath done to me great things ; and holy is His Name. And His mercy is on them that fear him from generation to generation. He hath showed strength with His arm ; He hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. He hath put down the mighty from their seats, and exalted them of low degree. He hath filled the hungry with good things ; and the rich He hath sent empty away. He hath holpen His servant Israel, in remembrance of His mercy ; as He spake to our fathers, to Abraham, and to his seed for ever.

Now, when Elizabeth's full time was come that she should be delivered, she brought forth a son. And her neighbours and her relatives heard how the Lord had showed great mercy upon her ; and they rejoiced with her. And it came to pass, that on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child ; and they called him Zachariah, after the name of his father. And his mother answered and said, Not so ; but he shall be called John. And

they said unto her, There is none of thy kindred that is called by this name. And they made signs to his father, how he would have him called. And he asked for a writing tablet, and wrote, saying, His name is John. And they marvelled all. And his mouth was opened immediately, and his tongue loosed, and he spake, and praised God. And fear came on all that dwelt round about them : and all these things were noised abroad throughout all the hill country of Judæa. And all that heard them laid them up in their hearts, saying, What manner of child shall this be ! And the hand of the Lord was with him.

And his father Zachariah was filled with the Holy Spirit, and prophesied, saying, Blessed be the Lord God of Israel ; for He hath visited his people, and wrought redemption for them, and hath raised up an horn of salvation for us ; as He spake by the mouth of His holy prophets, which have been since the world began : that we should be saved from our enemies, and from the hand of all that hate us ; to perform the mercy promised to our fathers, and to remember His holy covenant ; the oath which He sware to our father Abraham, that He would grant unto us, that we being delivered out of the hands of our enemies might serve Him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before Him, all the days of our life.

[Then said he to John], And thou, child, shalt be called the prophet of the Most High : for thou shalt go before the face of the Lord to prepare His ways ; to give knowledge of salvation unto His people by the remission of their sins, through the tender mercies of our God ; whereby the sun-rise from on high hath visited us, to give light to them that sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.

Now after two years, behold, there came magicians from Arabia to Jerusalem, saying, Where is he that is born king of the Jews ? for we in the east have seen his star, and are come to do him homage. When Herod the king had heard these things, he was exceeding wroth, and all Jerusalem with him. And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he demanded of them where the Messiah should be born. And they said unto him, In Bethlehem-Judah : for thus it is written by the prophet, And thou Bethlehem-Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall he come forth unto Me that is to be ruler in Israel.

Then, Herod, when he had privily called the magicians, enquired of them diligently what time the star appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem, and said, Go and search diligently for the child ; and when ye have found him, bring me word again, that I also may come and do him homage. When they had heard the king, they departed ; and, lo, the star, which they saw in the east, went before them, till it came and stood over where the child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy. And when they were come into the house, they saw the child with his mother, and fell down and did him homage : and when they had opened their stores, they presented unto him gifts ; gold, and frankincense, and myrrh. And it came to pass, when they were fast asleep, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared unto them, saying, Beware of returning to Jerusalem to Herod, so they went and returned to their own country by another way.

Then Herod, when he saw that he was mocked of the magicians, was exceeding wroth, and sent forth, and slew all the children that were in Bethlehem, and in all the borders thereof, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had diligently enquired of the magicians. And Elizabeth, having heard that they were searching for John, took him and went up into the hill country, and kept looking where to conceal him. And there was no place of concealment. And Elizabeth, groaning with a loud voice, said, O mountain of God, receive mother and child. And immediately the mountain was cleft, and received her. And, lo, a light shone about them, for the angel of the Lord was with them, keeping watch over them.

And Herod searched for John ; [and when he found him not], he sent officers to Zachariah, saying, Where hast thou hid thy son ? But he answering said unto them, I am the servant of God in holy things, and I abide continually in the Temple of the Lord : I know not where my son is. Then the officers went away, and reported these things unto Herod. Then Herod was exceeding wroth, and said, His son is destined to be king over Israel. And he sent to him again, saying, Tell the truth ; where is thy son ? for thou knowest that thy life is in my hand. And Zachariah said, I am God's witness, if thou sheddest my blood ; for the Lord will receive my spirit, because thou sheddest innocent blood [[in the Temple of the Lord]]. And when Herod heard this, he was the more exceeding angry, and ordered him to be slain [[in

the midst of the altar]] before the dawn, that the slaying of him might not be prevented by the people.

[[Now at the hour of salutation when the priests went away, Zachariah came not forth to meet them with the blessing, as was the custom. And the priests stood waiting for Zachariah to salute him at the prayer, and to glorify the Most High. And as he still tarried, they were all afraid. But one of them ventured to go in, and he saw congealed blood beside the altar; and he heard a voice saying, Zachariah is slain, and his blood shall not be wiped up until his avenger come. And when he heard this saying, he was afraid, and went out and told it to the priests. And they ventured in, and saw what had come to pass. And, behold, the carved work of the Temple made a wailing noise, and was rent from the top even unto the bottom. And they found not his body, but only his blood turned into stone. And they were afraid, and went out and reported to the people that Zachariah had been slain. And when all the tribes of the people heard it, they mourned and lamented for him three days and three nights. And after three days the priests took council together whom they should put in his place; and the lot fell upon Simeon]].<sup>1</sup>

[But Elizabeth escaped with John], and the child grew, and waxed strong in spirit; and he was in the desert until the day of his showing unto Israel.

*(Cætera desunt)*

<sup>1</sup> The sections within double brackets appear to be later additions. For another version of the death of Zachariah, see the quotation from Isho'dad, pp. 13-14.





## PART III

# VERBAL AND INCIDENTAL SOURCES OF THE NATIVITY STORIES

### I. THE PROBLEM OF THE NATIVITY STORIES

How did the Christian stories of the birth of Jesus, and we may now add the Baptist stories of the birth of John, originate? In the former case, for the latter was not of primary importance to Christian theologians, the most ingenious theories have been propounded in order to harmonize and historicize the conflicting statements in the First and Third Gospels. Orthodox Christianity has been content to believe that every detail of the birth of Jesus as recorded in these Gospels was true, and had actually taken place. "Miraculous it all is, and professes to be," writes Edersheim; "not indeed in the connection of these events, which succeed each other with psychological truthfulness; nor yet in their language, which is of the times and the circumstances; but in the underlying facts."<sup>1</sup> The objection that the stories might be the outcome of current Jewish Messianic expectations is answered by the same writer a few lines farther down. "But of this whole narrative it may be said, that such inception of the Messianic appearance, such announcement of it, and such manner of His Coming, could never have been invented by contemporary Judaism; indeed, ran directly counter to all its preconceptions." This mature judgment by one who was himself a Jew, and who was well acquainted with Jewish literature and tradition, could have no other effect than to confirm the oft-repeated argument of Gentile Christian divines which insisted on the entirely novel and non-Jewish character of the birth of Christ. The prevalence of this opinion, which had almost become an axiom, so influenced the minds of unorthodox and non-Christian scholars, as to lead to the almost total abandonment of the Jewish field as a hunting-

<sup>1</sup> *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, p. 153.

ground for sources of the Gospel nativity stories, and operated as an important factor in driving students of Christian origins to seek for parallels in the traditions of other faiths, helping to produce *Pagan Christs* and a host of works of a similar nature.

One consideration which invalidates the argument for a non-Jewish origin of the Gospel nativity stories, and which should have weighed even with those who were not prepared to accept their literal truth, is that these stories were indubitably written down in Palestine by Jewish Christians, who owing to their religious and political horizon could have had no sympathy with imported views, either from India or elsewhere. True, many of these Jewish Christians, the so-called Ebionites, denied the Virgin Birth, but this was because of the form which the doctrine assumed after Gentile redaction of the *Gospel of Matthew*. Dr. Edersheim notwithstanding, there is no room for any other hypothesis than that the nativity stories were consistent with and reflected contemporary Jewish Messianic conceptions. The object of the Evangelists was to prove that Jesus is the Messiah, and no investigation which ignores this object is calculated to throw any direct light on the vexed problem of the nativity stories. The problem can only be solved by finding the Jewish background of ideas, and this has been attempted in the succeeding sections.

## II. THE PRIESTLY MESSIAH

We have before us two sets of Messianic nativity stories, those relating to John and Jesus respectively. As the greater part of the latter are covered by, and probably indebted to, the former, we shall make the sources of the *Book of the Nativity of John* our first concern, and deal later with the birth story of Jesus where this presents any real difference from that of the Baptist.

The Messianic expectation which lies behind the nativity stories of John the Baptist is that of the Priestly Messiah. At what time this expectation originated is uncertain, but it must have been a very venerable one. Preserved in the Deuteronomic Code was an ancient promise attributed to the great Lawgiver Moses. "The Lord thy God will raise up unto thee a Prophet from the midst of thee, of thy brethren, like unto me ; unto him

ye shall hearken ; according to all that thou desiredst of the Lord thy God in Horeb in the day of the assembly, saying, Let me not hear again the voice of the Lord my God, neither let me see this great fire any more, that I die not. And the Lord said unto me, They have well spoken that which they have spoken. I will raise them up a Prophet from among their brethren, like unto thee, and will put my words in his mouth ; and he shall speak unto them all that I shall command him. And it shall come to pass, that whosoever will not hearken unto my words which he shall speak in my name, I will require it of him.”<sup>1</sup> On this passage the Samaritans based their faith in the advent of the *Taheb* (the Restorer), who was to be of the tribe of Levi (Moses’ brethren), and who would recover the hidden vessels of the Tabernacle, said to have been buried by the High Priest Uzzi in a cave under Mount Garizim. Josephus tells us of a *pseudo-Taheb*, who, under the Procuratorship of Pontius Pilate, raised false hopes among the Samaritans by promising them that if they would follow him to Mount Garizim he would show them the sacred vessels.<sup>2</sup> This incident illustrates the antiquity and fervency of the Messianic expectation among the Samaritans.

Jewish expectation seems to have wavered between a Priestly and a Royal Messiah. In the *Book of Jeremiah* the perpetuity of the House of Levi is guaranteed with that of the House of David,<sup>3</sup> while in the *Book of Malachi* the function of the messenger of the covenant is to purify the sons of Levi, “that they may offer unto the Lord an offering in righteousness.”<sup>4</sup> The Deuteronomic promise influenced Jewish expectations no less than Samaritan, and Jewish sages were accustomed to draw analogies between the Messiah and Moses. As Moses appeared, and was hid, and appeared again, so the Messiah would appear, and be hid, and appear again. As Moses brought down manna from heaven, so would the Messiah. As Moses made a spring of water to rise, so would the Messiah. Partisans of the Baptist claimed the Messiahship for him on the ground that he was a priest, nay, more, according to the Mandæans, that he was directly descended from Moses. Such a claim could not be without considerable influence on the Samaritans, large numbers of whom were won over to the Baptist cause.

<sup>1</sup> Deut. xviii. 15-19.

<sup>3</sup> Jer. xxxiii. 17-22.

<sup>2</sup> *Antiq.* xviii. iv. 1.

<sup>4</sup> Mal. iii. 1-3.

Prior to the days of John the Baptist the expectation of a Priestly Messiah had received a fresh impetus under the Maccabæan priest-kings, in favour of whom several books were written. These priest-kings assumed the title of "priests of the Most High God," a title which, in Abraham's day, Melchizedek, the priest-king of Salem, had borne. Many scholars believe that the 110th Psalm, where the king is addressed as "a priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek," was written in honour either of Simon Maccabæus or John Hyrcanus. The downfall of the Maccabees and the usurpation of the throne of Israel by the hated Edomite Herod gave a clear field to any new claimants for Messianic honours. A compromise was effected between the great rival parties of Sadducees and Pharisees, the former of whom upheld the expectation of a Priestly Messiah, while the latter expected a Davidic. It was suggested that the Messiah would spring from the union of a Davidic father and a Levitic mother.

*The "Testaments of the XII Patriarchs"*

In the *Testaments of the XII Patriarchs*, a Jewish work which was probably composed in the second century B.C. and redacted in the first, this compromise may be clearly seen. The *Testament of Simeon*, chapter vii., for instance, opens with the admonition: "And now, my children, obey Levi and Judah, and be not lifted up against these two tribes, for from them shall arise unto you the salvation of God. For the Lord shall raise up from Levi as it were a High Priest, and from Judah as it were a King, He shall save all the race of Israel." The original text of the *Testaments* had only acknowledged a Priestly Messiah, and there can be little doubt that the author of the *Book of the Nativity of John* used it as one of his literary sources.

In the *Testament of Levi*, chapter xviii., we read :

- "2 Then shall the Lord raise up a new priest.  
And to him all the words of the Lord shall be revealed ;  
And he shall execute a righteous judgment upon the earth for a multitude of days.
- 3 And his star shall arise in heaven as of a king,<sup>1</sup>  
Lighting up the light of knowledge as the sun the day,  
And he shall be magnified in the world.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. "Where is he that is born king of the Jews ? for we in the east have seen his star, and are come to do him homage" (Matt. ii. 2).



- 4 He shall shine forth as the sun on the earth,  
And shall remove all darkness from under heaven,  
And there shall be peace in all the earth.<sup>1</sup>
- 9 And in his priesthood the Gentiles shall be multiplied in knowledge upon the earth,  
And enlightened through the grace of the Lord:  
In his priesthood shall sin come to an end,<sup>2</sup>  
And the lawless shall cease to do evil."

Again in the *Testament of Dan*, chapter v., we have the following:

- "10 And there shall arise unto you from the tribe of Levi the salvation of the Lord;  
And he shall make war against Beliar,  
And execute an everlasting vengeance on our enemies:  
11 And the captivity shall he take from Beliar,  
And turn disobedient hearts unto the Lord,<sup>3</sup>  
And give to them that call upon Him eternal peace."

The influence of the *Testaments* on Jewish Messianic conceptions must have been very great, for the early Christians skilfully interpolated the Messianic passages in order to make them apply to Jesus. In illustration we may quote one or two such passages from the *Testament of Benjamin*. The Christian interpolations are enclosed in square brackets.

Chapter iii. 8: "In thee shall be fulfilled the prophecy of heaven [concerning the Lamb of God, and Saviour of the world], that a blameless one shall be delivered up for lawless men, and a sinless shall die for ungodly men [in the blood of the covenant, for the salvation of the Gentiles and of Israel, and shall destroy Beliar and his servants]."

Chapter ix. 2-5: "Nevertheless the Temple of God shall be in your portion, and the last (Temple) shall be more glorious than the first. And the twelve tribes shall be gathered together there, and all the Gentiles, until the Most High shall send forth his salvation in the visitation of an only-begotten prophet. [And He shall enter into the Temple, and there shall the Lord be treated with outrage, and He shall be lifted up upon a tree. And the

<sup>1</sup> Cf. "Through the tender mercies of our God; whereby the sun-rise from on high hath visited us, to give light to them that sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace" (Luke i. 78).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. "To give knowledge of salvation to his people by the remission of their sins" (Luke i. 77).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. "To turn . . . the disobedient to the wisdom of the just" (Luke i. 17).

veil of the Temple shall be rent, and the Spirit of God shall pass on to the Gentiles as fire poured forth. And He shall ascend from Hades and shall pass from earth into heaven. And I know how lowly He shall be on earth, and how glorious in heaven]."

Chapter x. 7-9: "Then shall we also rise, each one over our tribe, worshipping the King of heaven, [who appeared upon earth in the form of a man in humility. And as many as believe on Him on the earth shall rejoice with Him]. Then also all men shall rise, some unto glory and some unto shame. And the Lord shall judge Israel first, for their unrighteousness; [for when He appeared as God in the flesh to deliver them they believed Him not]. And then shall He judge all the Gentiles, [as many as believed Him not when He appeared upon earth]."

So great an obstacle was the belief in a Priestly Messiah that, as we shall show in the next section, the Church was forced to prove that Jesus was a priest.

### III. THE "EPISTLE TO THE SAMARITANS"

By far the most important Christian testimony to the priesthood of Jesus is contained in the so-called *Epistle to the Hebrews*, which appears from the internal evidence to be in reality an *Epistle to the Samaritans*.

The authorship and direction of this epistle has for long taxed the scholarship of expositors; and while the present writer has no solution to offer for the first problem, he believes that he has succeeded in discovering the correct solution for the second. That the Samaritans regarded themselves as Hebrews there can be no question, and equally none that they held to the doctrine of the Priestly Messiah, the "Prophet like unto Moses." The writer of the Acts tells us how, through the agency of the Evangelist Philip, many of the Samaritans accepted Jesus as the Messiah when they saw the miracles that were done. We hear no more of these Samaritan Christians, but they must soon have begun to ask themselves, If Jesus is the true Messiah, how is it that He was not a priest? To answer this doubt, and to confirm the faith of the waverers, we suggest that the treatise known as the *Epistle to the Hebrews* was sent. From this standpoint let us examine a few passages, which have a direct bearing on our inquiry into the origin of the nativity stories.

The unknown writer commences his epistle by extolling the dignity and majesty of the Messiah, in order to impress his readers with the gravity of denying One for whom God Himself has vouched and exalted. He then goes on to remind them of the miracles which they had seen, and the outpouring of the Holy Ghost (cf. Acts viii. 5-17). "Therefore we ought to give the more earnest heed to the things which we have heard, lest at any time we should let them slip. For if the word spoken by angels was stedfast, and every transgression and disobedience received a just recompence of reward; how shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation; which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed unto us by them that heard him; God also bearing them witness, both with signs and wonders, and with divers miracles, and gifts of the Holy Ghost, according to his own will?" (ii. 1-4). The Samaritans believed that though the Messiah was to be like unto Moses he could not be greater. Our author combats this belief. "Wherefore, holy brethren, partakers of the heavenly calling, consider the Apostle and High Priest of our profession, Christ Jesus; who was faithful to him that appointed him, as also Moses was faithful in all his house. For this man was counted worthy of more glory than Moses, inasmuch as he who hath builded the house hath more honour than the house. For every house is builded by some man; but he that built all things is God. And Moses verily was faithful in all his house, as a servant, for a testimony of those things which were to be spoken after; but Christ as a son over his own house; whose house are we, if we hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm unto the end" (iii. 1-6). In the next place, the Samaritan Christians are reminded that although Moses had led the people out of Egypt, many of them could not enter into the Promised Land because of unbelief, and lest some of them should be of the opinion held by many of the Samaritans that Joshua was the "Prophet like unto Moses," the author adds, "For if Jesus (Joshua) had given them rest, then would he not afterward have spoken of another day. There remaineth therefore a rest to the people of God. . . . Let us labour therefore to enter into that rest, lest any man fall after the same example of unbelief" (iv. 8-11).

We come now to a very important part of the epistle wherein the author attempts to answer the doubts of the Samaritans concerning Jesus because He was not a priest deriving His descent

from Levi. He argues that Jesus is indeed a priest, nay, more, a High Priest. "And no man taketh this honour unto himself, but he that is called of God, as was Aaron. So also Christ glorified not himself to be made an high priest ; but he that said unto him, Thou art my Son, to-day have I begotten thee. As he saith also in another place, Thou art a priest for ever, after the order of Melchizedek " (v. 4-6). The author is annoyed that it should be necessary to explain the typology of Melchizedek. "Of whom we have many things to say, and hard to be uttered, seeing ye are dull of hearing. For when for the time ye ought to be teachers, ye have need that one teach you again which be the first principles of the oracles of God ; and are become such as have need of milk, and not of strong meat " (v. 11-12). Here follows a rather violent diatribe against those who fall away from the faith, and "crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh." Feeling, however, that his language has been a little too strong, the author tries to soften the effect of his words, by telling his readers that he is persuaded better things of them, and recalling their labour of love in ministering to the saints. Having exhorted them to become "followers of them who through faith and patience inherit the promises," he returns to Melchizedek. "Now consider," he says, "how great this man was, unto whom even the patriarch Abraham gave the tenth of the spoils. And verily they that are of the sons of Levi, who receive the office of priesthood, have a commandment to take tithes of the people according to the law, that is, of their brethren, though they come out of the loins of Abraham : but he whose descent is not counted from them received tithes of Abraham, and blessed him that had the promises. And without all contradiction the less is blessed of the better. . . . And, as I may so say, Levi also, who receiveth tithes, payed tithes in Abraham. For he was yet in the loins of his father, when Melchizedek met him. If therefore perfection were by the Levitical priesthood, (for under it the people received the law,) what further need was there that another priest should rise after the order of Melchizedek, and not be called after the order of Aaron ? For the priesthood being changed, there is made of necessity a change also of the law. For he of whom these things are spoken pertaineth to another tribe, of which no man gave attendance at the altar. For it is evident that our Lord sprang out of Judah ; of which tribe Moses spake nothing concerning priesthood. And it is yet far more evident :



for that after the similitude of Melchizedek there ariseth another priest, who is made, not after the law of a carnal commandment, but after the power of an endless life. . . . And inasmuch as not without an oath he was made priest : (for those priests were made without an oath ; but this with an oath by him that said unto him, The Lord sware and will not repent, Thou art a priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek :) by so much was Jesus made a surety of a better covenant. And they truly were many priests, because they were not suffered to continue by reason of death : but this man, because he continueth ever, hath an unchangeable priesthood " (vii. 4-24).

After this very ingenious proof of the priesthood of Jesus, the author follows up his argument with a discussion on the New Covenant into which we need not follow him except to take notice that in deference to Samaritan prejudices his illustrations are confined to the Tabernacle, as the Samaritans rejected the Temple at Jerusalem. Once again comes the warning against falling away, and the inevitable punishment of apostasy. The author bids his readers " call to remembrance the former days, in which, after ye were illuminated, ye endured a great fight of afflictions " (alluding perhaps to the Pauline persecution, Acts ix. 1-2, xxvi. 10-11, ix. 31). The epistle closes with chapters in praise of faith and patience and the exhortation, " Remember them which have the rule over you, who have spoken unto you the word of God : whose faith follow, considering the end of their conversation. Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and to-day, and for ever. Be not carried about with divers and strange doctrines " (xiii. 7-9).

The present writer cannot escape from the conviction that to the Samaritan Christians alone could such an epistle have been addressed. All along, the author has in his mind distinctly Samaritan tenets. Why, if his readers were not Samaritans, should he single out the doctrines " of baptisms, and of laying on of hands, and of resurrection of the dead, and of eternal judgment " (Heb. vi. 2) as foundation doctrines which these converts had had to be taught ? They were doctrines accepted by the Jews but denied by the Samaritans.

The *Epistle to the Hebrews* (or Samaritans) lets us see one attempt to prove that Jesus fulfilled the expectation of a Priestly Messiah though not descended from Levi. Other Christians, however, in keeping with the compromise referred to in Section II.,



would have it that Jesus was born of a Judæan father and a Levitic mother. S. Ephraim, in his *Gospel Commentaries*, attacks this view. "But if," he says, "because the Scripture said, 'Elizabeth thy sister,' you therefore think that this was said, that it might be made manifest that Mary was of the house of Levi, in another passage the same Scripture said that they were both, Joseph and Mary, of the house of David." Elsewhere, strangely enough, S. Ephraim himself speaks of Jesus as a Levite. When Jesus sent Peter to catch a fish in order to pay the tribute money, the Pharisees went with him. "And when he had drawn out the fish, which had in its mouth a stater, the symbol of dominion, those haughty ones were reproved and confounded, because they believed not that He was a Levite, to whom the sea and the fishes were witnesses that He is king and priest." A reading to the same effect is found in the text of one Gospel MS., *Codex Algerinæ Peckover*: "Vade ad mare, et mitte ibi rete. Quia me putarunt alienum, doceat se mare, me non solum sacerdotem esse, sed et regem. Vade ergo et tu quoquedā, quasi unus ex alienis."<sup>1</sup>

We have now dealt at some length with the expectation of a Priestly Messiah, and its influence on the claims of John and Jesus; and we have done so, because the Hebrew (Jewish and Samaritan) conception of the Messiah as a "Prophet like unto Moses" holds the key to the origin and form of the *Book of the Nativity of John*, and in a secondary sense to the Gospel stories of the birth of Jesus. In the Jewish and Samaritan traditions of the birth of Moses we have the principal source of the Baptist and Christian nativity stories.

#### IV. THE NATIVITY LEGENDS OF MOSES

The Jewish legends of the birth of Moses are contained in numerous documents, among which may be mentioned the *Talmud* and *Midrashim*, the Palestinian *Targum*, the *Antiquities* of Josephus, the so-called *Biblical Antiquities* attributed to Philo, the *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer*, the *Book of Jasher*, and the *Chronicles of Jerahmeel*. The Samaritans also possess a chronicle entitled *Molad Mosheh* (the Birth of Moses), which, according to that authority on the Samaritans, Dr. Moses Gaster, "in its structure and form reminds one very forcibly of some of the apocryphal gospels of the

<sup>1</sup> See Dr. Rendel Harris's article, "A Lost Verse of St. John's Gospel," in the *Expository Times*, May, 1927.

Nativity.”<sup>1</sup> There can be little doubt that these legends, in much the same form as they have come down to us, were in circulation before the Christian Era. As nothing will be gained by quoting from all the works of reference enumerated, we shall content ourselves with reproducing a continuous narrative made up of extracts from the available material. Noteworthy passages are italicised.

### *The Prophecy of Miriam*

“There was a Levite in the land of Egypt (of saintly life) whose name was Amram, the son of Qeath, the son of Levi, the son of Jacob. This man betrothed Jochebed, the daughter of Levi, the sister of his father, and she conceived and bare a daughter, and called her name Miriam, because in those days people began to embitter the lives of the Israelites. She conceived again and bare a son, whose name she called Aaron, because during the time of her pregnancy, Pharaoh began to shed the blood of their males upon the ground, and to cast them into the river of Egypt. When, however, the word of the king and his decree became known respecting the casting of their males into the river, *many of God's people separated from their wives, as did Amram from his wife.*

“After the lapse of three years, the Spirit of God came upon Miriam, so that she went forth and prophesied in the house, saying, *Behold, a son shall be born to my mother and father, and he shall rescue the Israelites from the hands of the Egyptians.* When Amram heard his young daughter's prophecy he took back his wife, from whom he had separated in consequence of Pharaoh's decree to destroy all the male line of the house of Jacob.”<sup>2</sup>

### *The Dream of Pharaoh*

“And Pharaoh told that he, being asleep, had seen in his dream, and, behold, all the land of Egypt was placed in one scale of a balance, and a lamb, the young of a sheep, was in the other scale; and the scale with the lamb in it overweighed. *Forthwith he sent and called all the magicians of Egypt, and imparted to them his dream. Immediately, Jannes and Jambres, the chief of the magicians, opened their mouth and answered Pharaoh, A certain child is about to be born in the congregation of Israel, by whose hand will be destruction to all the land of Egypt.* Therefore did

<sup>1</sup> *The Samaritans*, the Schweich Lectures for 1923, p. 142.

<sup>2</sup> *Chronicles of Jerahmeel*.

*Pharaoh, king of Egypt, give counsel to the Jewish midwives, . . . and said, When you attend Jewish women, and see them bear, if it be a male child, you shall kill him; but if a daughter, you may let her live. But the midwives . . . saved the children. And when Pharaoh saw this, he commanded all his people, saying, Every male child that is born to the Jews you shall cast into the river; but every daughter, you may spare."*<sup>1</sup>

### *The Annunciation to Amram*

"(And Amram) was afraid for his whole nation, lest it should fail, by the want of young men to be brought up hereafter, and was very uneasy at it, his wife being then with child, and he knew not what to do. Hereupon he betook himself to prayer to God.

*"And God stood by him in sleep . . . (and said), Know, therefore, that I shall provide for you all in common what is for your good, and particularly for thyself what shall make thee famous, for that child, out of dread of whose nativity the Egyptians have doomed the Israelite children to destruction, shall be this child of thine, and he shall be concealed from those who watch to destroy him: and when he is brought up in a surprising way, he shall deliver the Hebrew nation from the distress they are under from the Egyptians. His memory shall be famous while the world lasts; and this not only among the Hebrews, but foreigners also. . . . When the vision had informed him of these things, Amram awaked and told it to Jochebed his wife."*<sup>2</sup>

### *The Birth of Moses*

"And it came to pass at the end of six months from the time of her conception that (Jochebed) bare a son (according to some traditions, without pain). *The whole house was at that moment filled with a great light, as the light of the sun and the moon in their splendour.* The woman saw that the child was good and beautiful to behold, so she hid him in an inner room (others say, a cave) for three months."<sup>3</sup>

### *The Escape of Moses*

"But after that time, Amram, fearing that he should be discovered, and by falling under the king's displeasure, both he and

<sup>1</sup> *Targum of Palestine.*    <sup>2</sup> *Josephus, Antiquities.*    <sup>3</sup> *Chronicles of Jerahmeel.*

his child should perish, and so he should make the promise of God of none effect, he determined rather to intrust the safety and care of the child to God, than to depend on his own concealment of him. . . . When they had thus determined, they made an ark of bulrushes . . . and put the infant into it, and setting it afloat upon the river, they left its preservation to God.”<sup>1</sup>

## V. COMMENTS ON THE NATIVITY LEGENDS OF MOSES

The influence of these Mosaic nativity legends on the birth story of John the Baptist is at once apparent. Amram and Jochebed, like Zachariah and Elizabeth, are of the house of Levi, a worthy pair, and well-stricken in years; for according to tradition Jochebed was an hundred and thirty years old when she conceived Moses. In both cycles of legend Magi predict to the king the birth of the wonder child, who thereupon decrees the slaughter of all the male children. There is an annunciation to Amram similar to the one made to Zachariah. In each case their wives are promised sons who will deliver their people from oppression. Both Moses and Joseph are concealed from the officers of the king.

Related to these Mosaic nativity legends, and of the greatest importance to us in seeking for the background of ideas which produced the *Book of the Nativity of John*, is a further tradition to the effect that when Pharaoh decreed the destruction of the male children of the Hebrews many of the mothers fled with their babes. “But the officers of Pharaoh followed the traces of the women, and would have slain the infants, had not the earth opened its mouth, and received the little babes into a hollow place within, where they were fed by the hands of angels with butter and honey.”<sup>2</sup> Here we have a parallel to the flight of Elizabeth with the infant John, followed by like miraculous occurrences. The children are fed in concealment with butter and honey, and in the *Diatessaron*, according to Isho’dad, the dietary of the Baptist was given as “honey and milk of the mountains.” Another of the Jewish legends relates that the pregnant mothers of the Hebrews, when the decree of Pharaoh was made known, retired to an unfrequented spot, where they were delivered under the shadow of fruit trees. Now the *Quran* has preserved a tradition of the birth of Jesus, in

<sup>1</sup> Josephus, *Antiquities*.

<sup>2</sup> S. Baring-Gould, *Legends of Old Testament Characters*, p. 70.



which, when Mary had conceived "she retired aside with him in her womb to a distant place; and the pains of childbirth came upon her near the trunk of a date-palm."<sup>1</sup> The similarity of the various nativity legends seems to have confused Mohammed, for in one place he calls Mary the mother of Jesus, the daughter of Imrân (Amram),<sup>2</sup> and in another, the sister of Aaron.<sup>3</sup>

Before we leave the Mosaic nativity legends there are still one or two comparisons to be made between the birth of Moses and that of Jesus. The reader will, doubtless, have remarked the painless birth and the appearance of the light, and recognized them as parallels. The painless birth we have already met with in the writings of S. Ephraim and the *Odes of Solomon*: for the light which shone at the birth, we have the testimony of the *Book of James*. Joseph and the midwife whom he has been to find have arrived at the cave near Bethlehem where he had left Mary. "And they stood in the place of the cave, and, behold, a luminous cloud overshadowed the cave. And the midwife said, My soul has been magnified this day, because mine eyes have seen strange things, because salvation has been brought forth to Israel. And immediately the cloud disappeared out of the cave, and a great light shone in the cave, so that the eyes could not bear it. And in a little that light gradually decreased, until the infant appeared, and went and took the breast from his mother Mary."<sup>4</sup> The sequel tells how the midwife, refusing to believe that a virgin could bring forth, insists on making an examination, upon which her hand becomes inflamed and is only healed when she touches the babe. When we turn to the Mosaic legends, we find that Pharaoh's daughter is suffering from an inflammation, and goes to bathe in the river for relief. There she discovers the infant Moses in his ark of bulrushes, and upon touching the babe she is instantly cured.

Many of the incidents attending the births of John and Jesus are thus seen to be dependent on the Mosaic nativity legends, and where these are deficient the birth stories of other Israelitish heroes provide the greater part of the remaining details, and indeed in some instances duplicate the Mosaic account.

<sup>1</sup> *Sura*, xix. Sale's translation. In a footnote Sale explains, "To conceal her delivery, she went out of the city (Bethlehem?) by night, to a certain mountain."

<sup>2</sup> *Sura*, iii.

<sup>3</sup> *Sura*, xix.

<sup>4</sup> *Book of James*, xix.



## VI. BIRTH STORIES OF ISRAEL'S HEROES

The Mosaic legends told us nothing of a star heralding the birth of the child, but in the legends of the birth of Abraham this particular is forthcoming. Told in the words of the *Chronicles of Jerahmeel*, the story runs as follows: "The sages tell that when our forefather Abraham was born a star appeared, which swallowed up four other stars from the four sides of heaven. When the astrologers of Nimrod saw this, they forthwith went to Nimrod and said, Nimrod, of a certainty there is born to-day a lad who is destined to inherit both this world and the world to come."<sup>1</sup> It is discovered that the wonderful child which has just been born is the son of Terah, and his father, learning that the child's destruction is intended, conceals him in a cave for three years. With such legends as this circulating among the Jews before the Christian era there is surely no need to go outside of them to seek for the sources of the Baptist and Christian nativity stories. The Old Testament itself, in its account of the births of some of Israel's heroes, supplies much of the language of these stories, and the reader may profitably compare the following Biblical extracts with the Gospels and the *Book of the Nativity of John*:

*The Birth of Isaac* (Gen. xvii., xxi.)

"And when Abram was ninety years old and nine, the Lord appeared to Abram, and said unto him, . . . As for Sarai thy wife, thou shalt not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall her name be. And I will bless her, and give thee a son of her: yea, I will bless her, and she shall be a mother of nations; kings of people shall be of her. Then Abraham fell upon his face, and laughed, and said in his heart, Shall a child be born unto him that is an hundred years old? and shall Sarah, that is ninety years old, bear?<sup>2</sup> . . . And God said, Sarah thy wife shall bear thee a son indeed; and thou shalt call his name Isaac. . . . And the Lord visited Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did unto Sarah as he had spoken. For Sarah conceived, and bare Abraham a son in his old age, at the set time of which God had spoken to him. And Abraham called the name of the son that was born unto him,

<sup>1</sup> *Chronicles of Jerahmeel*, xxxiv.

<sup>2</sup> According to Mandæan tradition, Zachariah and Elizabeth were the same age respectively as Abraham and Sarah.

whom Sarah bare to him, Isaac. And Abraham circumcised his son Isaac, being eight days old, as God had commanded him. And Abraham was an hundred years old when his son Isaac was born unto him. And Sarah said, God hath made me to laugh, so that all that hear will laugh with me. And she said, Who would have said unto Abraham, that Sarah should have given children suck ? for I have borne him a son in his old age. And the child grew, and was weaned."

*The Birth of Samson (Judg. xiii.)*

"And there was a certain man of Zorah, of the family of the Danites, whose name was Manoah ; and his wife was barren, and bare not. And the angel of the Lord appeared unto the woman, and said unto her, Behold now, thou art barren, and bearest not : but thou shalt conceive, and bear a son. Now therefore beware, I pray thee, and drink not wine nor strong drink, and eat not any unclean thing : for, lo, thou shalt conceive, and bear a son ; and no razor shall come on his head : for the child shall be a Nazarite (dedicated) unto God from the womb : and he shall begin to save Israel out of the hand of the Philistines. . . . And the woman bare a son, and called his name Samson : and the child grew, and the Lord blessed him."

*The Birth of Samuel (1 Sam. i., ii.)*

"Now there was a certain man of Ramathaim-zophim, and his name was Elkanah (a Levite, 1 Chron. vi. 27). . . . And he had two wives ; the name of the one was Hannah, and the name of the other Peninnah : and Peninnah had children, but Hannah had no children. . . . Then said Elkanah her husband to her, Hannah, why weepest thou ? . . . am not I better to thee than ten sons ? So Hannah rose up after they had eaten in Shiloh, and after they had drunk. . . . And she was in bitterness of soul, and prayed unto the Lord, and wept sore. And she vowed a vow, and said, O Lord of hosts, if thou wilt indeed look on the affliction of thine handmaid, and remember me, and not forget thine handmaid, but wilt give unto thine handmaid a man child, then I will give him unto the Lord all the days of his life, and there shall no razor come upon his head. . . . And Elkanah knew Hannah his wife ; and the Lord remembered her. Wherefore it came to pass, when the time was come about after Hannah had conceived, that she bare a son, and called his name Samuel. . . . And the man

Elkanah, and all his house, went up to offer unto the Lord the yearly sacrifice, and his vow. But Hannah went not up; for she said unto her husband, I will not go up until the child be weaned, and then I will bring him, that he may appear before the Lord, and there abide for ever. . . . And when she had weaned him, she took him up with her. . . . And Hannah prayed, and said, My heart rejoiceth in the Lord, mine horn is exalted in the Lord: my mouth is enlarged over mine enemies; because I rejoice in thy salvation. There is none holy as the Lord: for there is none beside thee: neither is there any rock like our God . . . The bows of the mighty men are broken, and they that stumbled are girded with strength. . . . He raiseth up the poor out of the dust, and lifteth up the beggar from the dunghill, to set them with princes; . . . for by strength shall no man prevail. . . . And the child did minister unto the Lord, . . . and the child Samuel grew on, and was in favour both with the Lord, and also with men."

Every detail of the nativity of John the Baptist has now been illustrated from Jewish folklore and tradition: the aged parents, the barren wife, the Divine annunciation, the star, the enraged king, the massacre of the infants, and the providential escape. Most of these details apply equally to the nativity of Jesus, but we still have to find Jewish sources for the Virgin Birth.

## VII. JEWISH SOURCES FOR THE VIRGIN BIRTH

The Jewish origin of such a conception as the Virgin Birth has been negatived, as pointed out (see above, pp. 47-48), by leading Jewish and Gentile Christian writers, and very emphatically so by non-Christian Jews. The late Rev. Gerald Friedlander, for instance, in a note on chapter xxvi. of his translation of the *Pirke de R. Eliezer*, says: "The birth stories of Abraham, Moses, and Jesus have much in common except the 'Virgin Birth,' which is peculiar to the narrative concerning the birth of the founder of Christianity." How far this is from being the case, we shall now see. It is an encouragement to find at any rate one well-known scholar, who is not a Jew, whose researches have led him to different conclusions. Dr. F. C. Conybeare, in his book *Myth, Magic, and Morals*, has devoted a chapter to "Birth Legends." Having dealt with parallels in Greek Mythology, he goes on to quote the familiar lines of Virgil's fourth *Eclogue* with its prophecy of the

Virgin Birth. From this point we may follow him for a time in his own words :

"This passage of Virgil is interesting, because it shows how widely such ideas were diffused. But it is not even necessary to go so far afield for parallels to the legend of Christ's birth. They were already to be found in the Jewish literature of the first Christian age. Philo, if he did not actually believe that Isaac was begotten of Sarah by the angel which came down to Abraham to predict his birth, was at least familiar with such a belief among his contemporaries, and uses it up for his allegory. In his tract *On Change of Names* he writes in similar strain that 'Tamar was made pregnant of divine seed, and as she saw not him who sowed—for, as it is said, she veiled her face, as did Moses when he turned away fearing with holy fear to look on God—so she, having scanned the symbols and testimonies and judged of them in her heart that they were not imparted by mortal man, cried out aloud, "Of no man is this, by him (*i.e.* God) am I with child."'

"In another of his works, *About Cherubim* (chap. xiii.), he allegorizes away the wives of the Jewish patriarchs into the several virtues, but we feel that his allegory is suggested by the popular belief in miraculous or virgin births, when we meet with such phrases as the following :

" 'Sarah is represented as becoming pregnant when God visits her in her solitude. And she brings forth not to him who so visited her, but to him who yearned to attain to wisdom, and who is named Abraham. Yet more clearly does Moses teach us in Leah's case, saying that God opened her womb, for to open the womb is a man's task. But she conceived and bore, not to God—for he alone is all-sufficing to himself—but to Jacob, who had willingly laboured for the good cause, that Virtue might receive the divine seed from the first cause and bring forth to that one of her suitors who should be preferred. Again, when Isaac, the all-wise, prayed to God, Rebecca, who is Patience, became pregnant by him to whom the prayer was offered. And without any prayer or supplication at all, Moses, having taken to himself Sephora, who is winged or soaring Virtue, finds her with child by no one mortal.'

"So, in Matthew i. 18, it is said that 'When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found with child of the Holy Spirit.' No one would affirm that Philo



believed in the popular legends of miraculous births; but they suggested his allegory.”<sup>1</sup>

Conybeare’s quotations from Philo are very illuminating, for they link up the virgin wife and the barren wife, the mother of Jesus and the mother of John. We have already pointed out that in the Mandæan tradition of the birth of John, the child is born to Zachariah and his barren wife Elizabeth, yet he is “*planted out of the height*” and “*laid in the womb of Enishbai*.” Very appositely Frazer tells us how the barren women of Syria from time immemorial have resorted to shrines and hot springs dedicated to gods or saints to entreat the presiding divinity or saintship for a son, and have believed when conception followed that the god or dead “holy man” was directly responsible. Frazer cites Hannah as an example, and remarks: “Multitudes of men and women, in fact, whose mothers had resorted to holy places in order to procure offspring, would be regarded as the actual children of the god and would be named accordingly. Hence Hannah called her infant Samuel, which means ‘name of God’ or ‘his name is God’; and probably she sincerely believed that the child was actually begotten in her womb by the deity. The dedication of such children to the service of God at the sanctuary was merely giving back the divine son to the divine father.”<sup>2</sup>

To the Semitic mind there could be little difference between a woman who gave birth to a child “without knowing a man” and a barren woman who gave birth to a child when “well stricken in years.” Divine interposition could alone be accountable in either case.

Apart altogether from this aspect of Virgin Births, there was another very familiar to the Jews, due to the Semitic fondness for symbolism. Under this other aspect we are introduced to the Virgin Daughter of Zion, mother of Redeemed Israel, and typically of the Messiah, the Redeemer. A *catena* of Old Testament passages, from which we shall select a few, illustrates the conception.

### *The Annunciation (Isa. xl. 9)*

“O thou that tellest good tidings to Zion, get thee up into a high mountain; O thou that tellest good tidings to Jerusalem,

<sup>1</sup> Pp. 199, 200.

<sup>2</sup> *The Golden Bough, Part IV, Adonis Attis Osiris*, pp. 69, 70.



lift up thy voice with strength ; lift it up, be not afraid ; say unto the cities of Judah, Behold your God ! ”

“ *The Power of the Highest shall overshadow thee* ” (Isa. iv. 5)

“ And the Lord will create upon every dwelling place of mount Zion, and upon her assemblies, a cloud and smoke by day, and the shining of a flaming fire by night : for over all, the glory shall be a covering.”

*The Painless Birth* (Isa. lxvi. 7-11)

“ Before she travailed, she brought forth ; before her pain came, she was delivered of a man-child. Who hath heard such a thing ? who hath seen such things ? Shall the earth be made to bring forth in one day ? or shall a nation be born at once ? for as soon as Zion travailed, she brought forth her children. Shall I bring to the birth, and not cause to bring forth ? saith the Lord : shall I cause to bring forth, and shut the womb ? saith the Lord. Rejoice ye with Jerusalem, and be glad with her, all ye that love her : rejoice with joy with her, all ye that mourn for her : that ye may suck, and be satisfied with the breasts of her consolations ; that ye may milk out, and be delighted with the abundance of her glory.”

Elsewhere (e.g. in Isa. liv.), Zion is pictured as a barren wife, and this fancy captured the imagination of the Jewish writers of apocalypse. In the *Apocalypse of Baruch* (iii. 1) the seer asks, “ O Lord, my Lord, have I come into the world for this purpose that I might see the evils of my mother ? ” and the author of the *Apocalypse of Ezra* makes the barren Mother Zion the central figure of a long vision, from which we may quote the following extracts :

“ And while I spake these things in my heart, I lifted up mine eyes and beheld a woman on the right side, mourning and weeping with a loud voice. . . . And I said unto her, Tell me what hath befallen thee. And she answered and said unto me, I thine handmaid was barren, and did not bear, though I was with my husband thirty years. And I every day and every hour, during these thirty years, was petitioning and supplicating the Most High by day and by night. And it came to pass after these thirty years God heard the voice of thine handmaid, and saw her humiliation ; and looked upon my distress, and gave me a son. And I rejoiced

and delighted in him greatly, I and my husband and all my fellow townsfolk, and we glorified the Mighty One. . . .

"And it came to pass, while I was talking with her, and lo! her countenance shone exceedingly, and as the appearance of lightning became the look of her face. . . . And I saw, and lo! the woman was no longer visible to me, but a City that was builded. . . .

"—This is the explanation: This woman whom thou hast seen, this is Zion which thou now seest as a City being built. And whereas she said to thee concerning herself that she had been barren thirty years—(it is) because she was in the world three thousand years when no offering was offered in her. And it came to pass after three thousand years Solomon built the city and offered therein offerings: then it was that the barren bare a son."<sup>1</sup>

### VIII. CONCLUSION

We have now reached the *Ultima Thule* of our investigation, where we discover, that when our nativity legends of the Messiah, be he John or Jesus, are not echoes of Israel's ancient heroes, they are prophetic and apocalyptic conceptions historicized; the dreams of a suffering people made flesh and dwelling among us. In Part I. we considered the cycle of Messianic folklore connected with the disappearance and reappearance of the Messiah,<sup>2</sup> and need not revert to the subject again in this place, except to point out its association with the ideas which have occupied the preceding section. How admirably the seer of Patmos, steeped in the folklore of his race, paints for us in vivid colouring a picture of the nativity story! In apocalyptic guise we see Mother Zion, the Messiah her son, the great red dragon his enemy, and the wilderness sanctuary. What further need have we of witnesses? Were it not too wide a digression, we might enlarge on the influence of the disappearance and return of the Messiah, on the Ascension and Second Advent of Jesus, but we will content ourselves with raising the issue.

The *raison d'être* of the birth stories of both John and Jesus lay in the question which faced their respective disciples. Ought not the birth of the Messiah to have been on this wise? Indisputably, by all the interpretations of Scripture and traditional lore, it ought; and therefore it must have been.

<sup>1</sup> *Apoc. of Ezra*, chaps. ix. 38, 42-45; x. 25, 27, 43-46.

<sup>2</sup> See p. 18.

Concerning Jesus, we may say that, if the stories setting forth His birth according to current Messianic conceptions served as a stepping-stone by which His contemporaries were enabled to reach the Man Himself and grasp His mission, they fulfilled their purpose well enough. To-day they are a stumbling-block rather than a stepping-stone to the faith of many, and could conveniently be deleted, and placed among the Apocrypha. The Gospel would then begin, where the Gospel really began, "How God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power: who went about doing good, and healing all that were oppressed of the devil; for God was with him" (Acts x. 38). After all, His was still a Virgin Birth; for He was born of the Virgin Daughter of Zion, of the spiritual travail of His people; and His conception was overshadowed by the Spirit of God, that Eternal Spirit which ever enlightens our darkness. We can still say with the simplicity and fervency of Peter, "Lord, to whom shall we go? thou hast the words of eternal life. And we believe and are sure that thou art that Messiah, the Son of the living God" (John vi. 68, 69).

Of John, that pious patriotic Jewish soul, with whom the greater part of this book has been occupied, even though his disciples failed to prove that he was the Messiah, we can still say with Jesus, "He was more than a prophet."

## APPENDIX

THE LIFE OF JOHN THE BAPTIST BY SERAPION, AN  
EGYPTIAN BISHOP (c. A.D. 390)

### *The Infancy and Childhood*

WITH the assistance of God and His divine guidance, we begin to write the life of the holy Mar John the Baptist, son of Zacharias : may his intercession be with us. Amen !

There was an aged priest-Levite from the tribe of Judah, whose name was Zacharias. He was a prophet who rose among the children of Israel in the days of Herod, King of Judæa. He had a God-loving wife, called Elizabeth, and she was from the daughters of Aaron, from the tribe of Levi. She was barren and had no children, and she and her husband were advanced in years. They were both righteous and pious people, guiding their steps by all the commandments and ordinances of God. And Zacharias was officiating constantly in the Temple of the Lord. When it fell to him, during the turn of his division, to burn incense to the Lord, he entered the Temple according to his habit, at the time of the burning of the incense, and the angel of the Lord appeared to him immediately, standing on the right of the altar. When Zacharias saw him he was frightened and startled. But the angel said to him : " Do not be afraid, but rather rejoice, O Zacharias ! God has heard your prayer, and your wife Elizabeth shall conceive and bear you a son, who shall be called John ; you shall have joy and delight, and many shall rejoice over his birth. He shall be great before the Lord, and he shall not drink any wine or strong drink, and he shall be filled with the Holy Spirit while still in the womb of his mother, and shall reconcile many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God. He shall go before Him in the spirit and with the power of Elijah, in order to make ready for the Lord a people prepared for Him."

Zacharias was astonished at these words, and doubt overtook

him, because no child had been born to him. He did not remember Abraham, the head of the Patriarchs, to whom God gave Isaac, after he had reached the age of a hundred years, nor his wife Sarah who was also barren like his own wife. Zacharias said, therefore, to the angel: "How can this happen to me while I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years?"

And the angel answered and said to him: "I am the angel Gabriel. I have been sent to speak to you and bring you this news. And from now you shall be silent and unable to speak until the day when this takes place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in due course." And he disappeared from sight.

Meanwhile the people were waiting for Zacharias, wondering at his remaining so long in the Temple. When he came out he was unable to speak to the people, and they perceived that he had seen a vision in the Temple, and he kept making signs to them. And as soon as his term of service was finished, he returned home. And Elizabeth got information of the affair (from God).

In those days Elizabeth conceived, and lived in seclusion till the fifth month, because she felt somewhat ashamed. She feared to appear in her old age while pregnant and milk dripping from her breasts. She lived in a secluded room of her own house, and Zacharias also lived likewise. Between them stood a locked door, and they did not speak at all to any one in all those days.

When she reached her sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph, from the house of David; and the name of the virgin was Mary. When the angel came into her presence he said to her:

"Rejoice, O Mary, because you have been favoured with a grace from God. You shall be with child and shall give birth to a son, who shall be called Jesus. He shall be great and shall be called 'Son of the Most High.'" And Mary said to the angel: "How can this happen to me while I have not known any man?" And the angel said to her: "The Holy Spirit shall descend upon you, and the power of the Most High shall overshadow you, because the child that is born of you is holy and shall be called 'Son of God,' and lo Elizabeth who is related to you is also expecting a child in her old age, and it is now the sixth month with her who is called barren, because with God there is nothing impossible."



And she had no doubt on the matter but said to the head of the angels : " I am the servant of the Lord, let it be with me as you have said." He then greeted her and disappeared.

Mary was astonished at the fact that Elizabeth was expecting a child, and kept saying in her heart : " Thy acts are wonderful and great, O God Omnipotent, because Thou hast given descendants to an old and barren woman. I shall not cease walking until I have met her and beheld the wonderful miracle which God has performed in our times : a virgin giving birth to a child, and a barren woman suckling."

In those days she rose up in haste and went into the hill-country to the town of Judah, and she entered the house of Zacharias, and greeted Elizabeth. The latter went to her with great joy and delight, and greeted her, saying : " Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb."

The holy and pious virgin embraced then the true turtle-dove, and the Word baptized John while still in the womb of his mother. And David appeared in the middle and said : " Mercy and truth have met together, and righteousness and peace have kissed each other." And immediately after John moved in the womb, as if wishing to come out and greet his master. After they had finished their mutual greetings, the Virgin stayed with Elizabeth three months, until the latter's time was near, and then returned to her home.

When the holy Elizabeth gave birth (to her son) there was great joy and delight in her house, and after eight days they went to circumcise him, and wished to call him Zacharias. His mother, however, said : " No, call him John." And they said to her : " You have no relation of that name." And she said to them : " Ask his father about his name." And he asked for a writing-tablet and wrote thus : " His name is John." When he had written this he recovered the use of his tongue forthwith, and he glorified God who had granted him this great mercy, and uttered prophecies concerning his son John the Baptist, and was cognisant of the gift that he had received from God.

John grew up in a beautiful childhood and sucked his mother two years. The grace of God was on his face, and he grew up fortified by the Spirit. When Jesus Christ was born in Bethlehem of Judæa, behold magians came from the East saying : " Where is he that is born the King of the Jews ? for we have seen his

star in the East and are come to worship him." When Herod the king heard these words he was troubled by what he had heard from the magians that (that child) was the King of the Jews, and he immediately desired to kill Him.

Then the angel of the Lord appeared forthwith to Joseph and said to him : " Arise and take the child and his mother and flee into the land of Egypt, and be thou there until I bring thee word." Then Herod sought the Master in order to destroy Him, but he did not find Him, and he began to kill all the children of Bethlehem. And Elizabeth feared that her son John might be killed like them, and she took him immediately to Zacharias in the Temple, and she said to him : " My lord, let us go with our son John to some other countries, in order to save him from Herod the unbeliever, who is murdering children because of Jesus the Christ. Mary and Joseph have already gone to the land of Egypt. Get up quickly that they may not kill our son, and change our joy into grief." And Zacharias answered and said to her : " I must not leave the service of the Temple of the Lord and go to a foreign land the inhabitants of which worship idols." And she said to him : " What should I do in order to save my infant child ? " And the old man answered and said to her : " Arise and go to the wilderness of 'Ain Kārim, and by the will of God you will be able to save your son. If they seek after him, they will shed my blood instead of his."

How great was the amount of grief that occurred at that time when they separated from each other ! The holy Zacharias took the child to his bosom, blessed him, kissed him and said : " Woe is me, O my son John, O glory of my old age ! They have impeded me from having any access to your face which is full of grace." He then took him and went into the Temple, and blessed him, saying : " May God protect you in your journey ! "

Immediately after, Gabriel, the head of the angels, came down to him from heaven holding a raiment and a leathern girdle, and said to him : " O Zacharias, take these and put them on your son. God sent them to him from heaven. This raiment is that of Elijah, and this girdle that of Elisha." And the holy Zacharias took them from the angel, prayed over them and gave them to his son, and fastened on him the raiment which was of camel's hair with the leathern girdle. He then brought him back to his mother and said to her : " Take him and bring him into the desert, because

the hand of the Lord is with him. I have learnt from God that he will stay in the desert till the day of his showing unto Israel."

The blessed Elizabeth took the child while weeping, and Zacharias also was weeping, and the latter said: "I know that I shall not see you again in the flesh. Go in peace. May God guide you." Elizabeth walked then away with her son, and went into the wilderness of 'Ain Kārim, and stayed there with him.

It happened that when King Herod sent troops to Jerusalem to kill its children, they came and began to kill children till the evening. That day was the seventh of September. When they began to return to their king, behold, Satan came to them and said: "How did you leave the son of Zacharias without killing him? He is hidden with his father in the Temple. Do not spare him, but kill him in order that the king may not wax angry with you. Go for him, and if you do not find the son, kill the father in his place."

The troops did what Satan taught them, and went to the Temple early in the morning, and found Zacharias standing and serving the Lord, and they said to him: "Where is thy son whom thou hast hidden from us here?" And he answered them: "I have no child here." They said to him: "You have a child whom you have hidden from the king." And he answered and said: "O cruel ones, whose king drinks blood like a lioness, how long will you shed the blood of innocent people?" They said to him: "Bring out your child so that we may kill him; if not, we shall kill you in his place." And the prophet answered and said: "As to my son, he has gone with his mother to the wilderness, and I do not know his whereabouts."

Now when Zacharias had said good-bye to Elizabeth and his son John, he had blessed him and made him a priest, and afterwards delivered him to his mother, who said to him: "Pray over me, O my holy father, so that God may render my path in the wilderness easy." And he said to her: "May He who made us beget our child in our old age, direct your path." Then she took the child and went into the wilderness in which no soul lived.

"O blessed Elizabeth, your story is truly wonderful and praiseworthy. You did not ask for an adult to accompany you, and you knew neither the way nor a hiding place. You did not care to provide food nor a little drinking water for the child. You did not say to his father Zacharias: 'To whom are you sending

me in the wilderness ?' At that time there was neither a monastery in the desert nor a congregation of monks so that you may say : 'I shall go and stay with them with my son.' Tell me, O blessed Elizabeth : whom did you trust, inasmuch as the evangelist testifies to the fact that you were advanced in years without having had any child, and now you have been suckling this child of yours for three years ?" Listen now to the answer of the blessed Elizabeth :

"Why are you astonished at me that I am going alone into the wilderness ? What should I fear while a kinsman of God is in my arms ? Behold Gabriel is accompanying me and paving the way for me." And she said : "I have confidence in the kiss that Mary, His mother, gave me, because when I greeted her the babe leaped with joy in my womb, and I heard both babes embracing each other in our wombs." And Elizabeth added : "I went and put on my son a raiment of camel's hair and a leathern girdle in order that the mountain of the holy wilderness may (in future) be inhabited, and in order that monasteries and congregations of monks may increase in it and that sacrifice may be offered in it in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. If God assisted Hagar and her son when they wandered in the desert, and they were only slaves, how will He not apply to us the precedent that He has Himself established beforehand ?"

In the above words we have described to you the merits of the holy Elizabeth. Let us now proceed and commemorate the holy Zacharias, the martyr, and relate to you a few of his numerous merits :

"I should wish to praise your true life, but I fear to hear a reproof from you, similar to that you made to the blessed Elizabeth. I am full of admiration for you, O pious Zacharias ! In the time when the soldiers of Herod came to you and asked you, saying : 'Where is your infant son, the child of your old age ?' you did not deny the fact and say : 'I have no knowledge of such a child,' but you simply answered : 'His mother took him into the desert.'" And when Zacharias uttered these words to the soldiers concerning his son, they killed him inside the Temple, and the priests shrouded his body and placed it near that of his father Berechiah in a hidden cemetery, from fear of the wicked (king) ; and his blood boiled on the earth for fifty years, until Titus son of Vespasian, the Emperor of the Romans, came and destroyed



Jerusalem and killed the Jewish priests for the blood of Zacharias, as the Lord ordered him.

As to the blessed John, he wandered in the desert with his mother, and God prepared for him locusts and wild honey as food, in accordance with what his mother was told about him not to let any unclean food enter his mouth. After five years the pious and blessed old mother Elizabeth passed away, and the holy John sat weeping over her, as he did not know how to shroud her and bury her, because on the day of her death he was only seven years and six months old. And Herod also died the same day as the blessed Elizabeth.

The Lord Jesus Christ, who with His eyes sees heaven and earth, saw His kinsman John sitting and weeping near his mother, and He also began to weep for a long time, without any one knowing the cause of His weeping. When the mother of Jesus saw Him weeping, she said to Him: "Why are you weeping? Did the old man Joseph or any other one chide you?" And the mouth that was full of life answered: "No, O my mother; the real reason is that your kinswoman, the old Elizabeth, has left my beloved John an orphan. He is now weeping over her body, which is lying in the mountain."

When the Virgin heard this she began to weep over her kinswoman, and Jesus said to her: "Do not weep, O my virgin mother, you will see her in this very hour." And while He was still speaking with His mother, behold a luminous cloud came down and placed itself between them. And Jesus said: "Call Salome and let us take her with us." And they mounted the cloud, which flew with them to the wilderness of 'Ain Kārim and to the spot where lay the body of the blessed Elizabeth, and where the holy John was sitting.

The Saviour said then to the cloud: "Leave us here at this side of the spot." And it immediately went, reached that spot, and departed. Its noise, however, reached the ears of Mar John, who, seized with fear, left the body of his mother. A voice reached him immediately and said to him: "Do not be afraid, O John. I am Jesus Christ, your master. I am your kinsman Jesus, and I came to you with my beloved mother in order to attend to the business of the burial of the blessed Elizabeth, your happy mother, because she is my mother's kinswoman." When the blessed and holy John heard this, he turned back, and Christ the Lord and His



virgin mother embraced him. Then the Saviour said to His virgin mother : " Arise, you and Salome, and wash the body." And they washed the body of the blessed Elizabeth in the spring from which she used to draw water for herself and her son. Then the holy Mary got hold of the blessed (John) and wept over him, and cursed Herod on account of the numerous crimes which he had committed. Then Michael and Gabriel came down from heaven and dug a grave ; and the Saviour said to them : " Go and bring the soul of Zacharias, and the soul of the priest Simeon, in order that they may sing while you bury the body." And Michael brought immediately the souls of Zacharias and Simeon, who shrouded the body of Elizabeth and sang for a long time over it.

And the mother of Jesus and Salome wept, and the two priests made the sign of the cross on the body and prayed over it three times before they laid it to rest in the grave ; then they buried it, and sealed the grave with the sign of the cross, and went back to their own places in peace. And Jesus Christ and His mother stayed near the blessed and the holy John seven days, and condoled with him at the death of his mother, and taught him how to live in the desert. And the day of the death of the blessed Elizabeth was the 15th of February.

Then Jesus Christ said to His mother ; " Let us now go to the place where I may proceed with my work." The Virgin Mary wept immediately over the loneliness of John, who was very young, and said : " We will take him with us, since he is an orphan without any one." But Jesus said to her : " This is not the will of My Father who is in the heavens. He shall remain in the wilderness till the day of his showing unto Israel. Instead of a desert full of wild beasts, he will walk in a desert full of angels and prophets, as if they were multitudes of people. Here is also Gabriel, the head of the angels, whom I have appointed to protect him and to grant him power from heaven. Further, I shall render the water of this spring of water as sweet and delicious to him as the milk he sucked from his mother. Who took care of him in his childhood ? Is it not I, O my mother, who love him more than all the world ? Zacharias also loved him, and I have ordered him to come to him and inquire after him, because although his body is buried in the earth, his soul is alive.

" As to Elizabeth his mother, she will constantly visit him

and comfort him, as if she was not dead at all. Blessed is she, O my mother, because she bore my beloved. Her mouth will never suffer putrefaction, because she kissed your pure lips ; and her tongue will not be dismembered in the earth, because she prophesied concerning you and said : ‘ Happy is she who believed that the promise that she received from the Lord would be fulfilled ’ ; nor will her womb decay in the earth, because her body, like her soul, shall suffer no putrefaction. And my beloved John will last for ever, and he will see us and be comforted.”

These words the Christ our Lord spoke to His mother, while John was in the desert. And they mounted the cloud, and John looked at them and wept, and Mart Mary wept also bitterly over him, saying : “ Woe is me, O John, because you are alone in the desert without any one. Where is Zacharias, your father, and where is Elizabeth, your mother ? Let them come and weep with me to-day.”

And Jesus Christ said to her : “ Do not weep over this child, O my mother. I shall not forget him.” And while He was uttering these words, behold the clouds lifted them up and brought them to Nazareth. And He fulfilled there everything pertaining to humanity except sin.

And John dwelt in the desert, and God and His angels were with him. He lived in great asceticism and devotion. His only food was grass and wild honey. He prayed constantly, fasted much, and was in expectation of the salvation of Israel.

*(The History of the Infancy of the Baptist ends here.)*<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> For the remainder of the document see the *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, Manchester, July 1927.

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